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## DISCOURSE COMMUNITY CHARACTERISTICS AND E.S.P TEACHING/ LEARNING PREREQUISITES

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**Abstract:** The notion of “discourse community” has been widely used in different literatures in the 20th and the beginning of the 21st Centuries. Different scholars (Hymes, Fish, Swales, Lave and Wenger, etc.) have given their own definitions / interpretations of what ‘a community’ or ‘a discourse community’ is. Therefore, we shall try to investigate the various notions and definitions of ‘discourse community’ and its different characteristics, focusing mainly on the field of teaching English for Specific Purposes (henceforth E.S.P). Globalisation, the market economy and the development of different technologies have entailed new jobs for which the use of different foreign languages has become necessary. Algeria has always been aware that the goals of economic development cannot be achieved through the official and national language alone (Arabic), but together with the teaching/learning of various foreign languages at different levels of the educational system. At university level, through the teaching of English as a subject in Science Departments, and the introduction of the L.M.D (Licence/Master/Doctorate) reform, the Ministry of Higher Education aims at a better training with adequate qualifications that allow the students to join the workforce and satisfy the needs of the socio-economic sector. The aim from teaching Languages for Special Purposes (L.S.P) in general and E.S.P in particular, is to answer the learners’ needs to become competent users of the target language to reach various purposes. L.S.P / E.S.P teaching addresses in most cases a restricted audience, a category of very specialised students who – after training and experience- will join a specific discourse community. In the present paper, we shall specify the characteristics of a scientific discourse community and suggest some prerequisite conditions for teaching / learning ESP adequately at university level.

**Keywords:** Community, discourse community, E.S.P. teaching, learning at university level.

### Introduction

The primary concern of this article is the present and future development of the Algerian society. The particular focus it takes is the role of language in that development, more particularly that of English as the language for international communication. In Algeria, considered as an “emerging” nation, there is much hope invested in science and technology to answer issues facing this country to move into “modernity”. Therefore scientific communities feel more concerned by the acquisition of a language that will enhance this mutation, and more and more Algerian researchers believe that the ‘normalisation’ of the teaching of English would be a fundamental contribution to these objectives.

Algeria has reckoned that the goals of economic and commercial development cannot be achieved through the official and national language alone (i.e. Arabic). Therefore, for Algeria to gain membership in the world community and compete effectively on the international scene because of globalisation (joining the World Trade Organisation and other organisations), students should be well-initiated to meet their own needs and the needs of the national education which aims at economic and commercial development.

It is important for Algeria’s future development (both socially and economically) that scientists (who already master Arabic and/or Berber, and French) be properly educated in English (mainly E.S.P) to become accepted members of the international scientific community. To meet these needs, appropriate courses should be designed for students at university levels.

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Therefore, in this article we are primarily concerned by the definitions and explanations of the concepts of 'discourse', 'community', 'discourse community' and how these relate to a specific community, in this case, the scientific community in Algeria.

### **Development of The Concept Of Discourse Community**

The notion of "discourse community" has been widely used in different literatures in the 20th and the beginning of the 21st Centuries. Different scholars (Hymes, Fish, Swales, Lave and Wenger, etc.) have given their own definitions / interpretations of what 'a community' or 'a discourse community' is. Therefore, in this part, we shall try to investigate the various notions and definitions of 'community' in general and 'discourse community' with its different characteristics in particular, focusing mainly on the field of teaching E.S.P.

### **The Notion of 'Community'**

Generally, we do not use language to communicate with the world at large, but with individuals or groups of individuals. As in life, for discussion and analysis in applied linguistics, these groups are gathered into communities. Hymes reserves the notion of a community for "*a local unit, characterized for its members by common locality and primary interaction.*" (Hymes (1974:51) in Milroy, 1990:15)

Roe (1993) defines a community as "*a group of individuals defined by their purpose*" and that "*language is used in-vivo through community communication because it mediates a purpose between people.*" He carries on saying that "*learning a language is gaining acceptance by a community.*" This is true for the Algerian scientific community where E.S.P. is taught to help these scientists communicate in foreign communities.

### **Kinds of Communities**

This part will refer to the different kinds of communities before reaching the explanation of 'discourse community'.

#### ***Speech Community***

According to Hymes (1972) "*a speech community refers to actual people who recognize their language use as different from other language users, e.g. Australian English*".(Hymes (1972) in Borg, 2003:398)

Swales's definition seems to be more holistic. According to Swales '*a speech community*' would be described as "*a homogeneous sociolinguistic assemblage of people who share place and background*" and that "*a speech community typically inherits its membership by birth, accident or adoption.*" (Swales, 1990: 24).

***Interpretive Community:*** Fish (1980) refers not to a gathering of individuals, but to an open network of people who share ways of reading texts, primarily literary texts; this term therefore highlights the social derivation of interpretation (Fish (1980) in Borg, 2003:398).

***Discourse Community***'Discourse community' is a complex concept to define, if we consider all the different debates held about it. Therefore, before dealing with 'Discourse community', we shall first give definitions of the two concepts (discourse / community) separately.

According to Baker and Ellece (2011:30-31) 'discourse' is a term with several related and quite often loose meanings. It can refer to:

*Any form of language in use (Brown and Yule, 1983) or naturally occurring language;*

*Spoken language, hence the term 'discourse marker' which tends to refer to speech;*

*Language above the sentence or above the clause (Stubbs, 1983);*

*Particular contexts of language use, and in this sense it becomes similar to concepts like genre or text-type: political discourse or media discourse.*

This last meaning of 'discourse' is of utmost importance to our article as we are concerned with the scientific discourse community which uses particular genres and text-types related to different sciences.

In Wikipedia:

**Discourse:** *is a concept describing all forms of communication that contribute to a particular, institutionalised way of thinking, and*

**Community:** *refers to the people who use, and therefore help create, a particular discourse.*

So, according to Swales (1990) discourse community members do not gather physically i.e. a newsletter that has a particular form of text organisation making it a genre, which they use to pursue their goals, unites them. Thus, in 1990, Swales described a ‘discourse community’ that was united only by written communication, and in 1998 he revisited the question and differentiated between ‘discourse communities’ and ‘place discourse communities’ which were united by both written and spoken communication.(Swales (1990/1998) in Borg, 2003: 399).

Also, belonging to a discourse community when writing in a social context means that “*your target discourse community produces specific texts (papers, books, etc); the language (which reflects ideologies, topics, approaches and styles) used in these texts constitute the criteria for membership in this particular community. If you want to enter this community, you must be able to use its language.* (Swales, retrieved from: <http://www.slideshare.net/eseochile/writing-in-a-social-context1-discourse-community>, 2009). However, according to (Borg, 2003:398) a ‘Discourse Community’ sits somewhat between ‘Speech Community’ and ‘Interpretive Community’.

For Downs and Wardle (2011:466), in terms of the fabric of society, ‘speech communities’ are centripetal (they tend to absorb people into the general fabric), whereas ‘discourse communities’ are centrifugal (they tend to separate people into occupational or special-interest groups). A ‘speech community’ typically inherits its membership by birth, accident or adoption; a ‘discourse community’ recruits its members by persuasion, training or relevant qualification”.

This also holds true for the scientific discourse community in Algeria and for which our aim is to help its members become able to communicate in those discourse communities.

### ***Communities of practice***

For Wenger, “*Initially, people have to join communities and learn at the periphery. As they become competent they move more to the “centre” of the particular community. Learning is, thus’ not seen as the acquisition of knowledge by individuals so much as a process of social participation*” (Wenger, in Borg: 2003:399). Thus, learning, in a community of practice, involves participation.

### ***Communities on the Internet***

In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the notion of ‘shared space’ has been introduced to refer to ‘virtual space’ in reference to communities which exist (at least partly) on the Internet.

### ***Imagined communities***

Baker and Ellece (2011: 58-59) refer to ‘imagined communities’ as ‘a concept outlined by Anderson (1983) referring to the social construction of a nation or community, based on the fact that very large numbers of people will never meet each other but still feel that they belong to the same nation.” The example of such a community they gave is what Anderson referred to as ‘print capitalism’ (the fact that books were printed in national languages to maximize circulation) has made imagined communities possible.

### ***Differences Between Communities***

Membership of a ‘discourse community’ is usually a matter of choice (unlike ‘speech community’).Members of a ‘discourse community’ actively share goals and communicate with each other to pursue those goals (unlike an ‘interpretive community’).One additional element characterizes discussions of ‘discourse communities’: these discussions typically focus on the use and analysis of written communication as in, Swales 1990 where a prototypical discourse community might be a society of stamp collectors. The collectors never gather physically;

instead a newsletter that has a particular form of text organisation, making it a genre, which they use to pursue their goals, unites them.

Beyond the study of writing in academic contexts, the concept of discourse community has proved fruitful for the study of writing for specific purposes (as shown in studies for business settings, etc.)

Johns (1997) and Porter (1986) have suggested that discourse communities might have common interests, but not necessarily common goals e.g. a family or the alumni body of a university. This is why (Johns 1997) noted that 'discourse community' is being displaced by 'community of practice'. (Johns and Porter, in Borg, 2003: 398-399)

'Communities of practice': (Wenger 1998) has a clear definition that includes 'mutual engagement' and 'a joint enterprise', which separates it from the more diffuse understandings that surround discourse community. (Wenger (1998) in Borg, 2003: 399).

The following table summarises the main differences between kinds of communities.

There are also many other communities such as: 'intellectual community', 'thought collective community', etc. (Hjørland, 2006)

As a conclusion for the explanation of the different kinds of communities, one would say that whatever the differences between the different communities, the common feature is as Bloor (1998: 57) notes "*a contribution to a model of how language is used in society.*"

<b>Differences Between Kinds of Communities</b>		
<b>Kind of Community</b>	<b>Membership</b>	<b>Modes of Communication</b>
<b>Speech Community</b> (a language or a dialect)	Members gather physically, by birth, accident or adoption.	Spoken communication
<b>Interpretive Community</b>	It is not a gathering of individuals, but an open network of people who share ways of reading texts, mainly literary texts.	Written mode (for interpretation)
<b>Discourse Community</b> , and 'later according to Swales 1998, it became <b>'Place Discourse Communities'</b>	Members do not have to gather physically, and membership is usually a matter of choice (through training and personal persuasion)	Swales (1990) refers mainly to a written mode of communication and later (1998) he refers to members of 'Place discourse communities' who are united by both spoken and written modes of communication.
<b>Communities of Practice</b> (Lave and Wenger)	Learning through social interaction.	Spoken and written modes.
<b>Communities on the internet</b>	People do not gather physically	Written mode.
<b>Imagined communities</b>	People do not gather physically, but they feel that they belong to the same nation/community.	Written mode.

Therefore, in the following part, we shall first describe a sample of the Algerian society which is the scientific discourse community. Then, we shall give some suggestions for teaching/learning E.S.P so that novice scientists i.e. undergraduate students will manage to join the scientific discourse community of experts.

## The Algerian Scientific Community

Before becoming a member of a scientific discourse community, students need to be properly trained. In order to reach that stage, different conditions are necessary. In Algeria, at university level, amongst training students in their different scientific and technical disciplines (medicine, biology, chemistry, computer science, civil engineering, mechanical engineering, etc.), another key component in their curriculum is 'the English course'. It is aimed at developing the students' English language competence. The English course has as its stated objectives the teaching skills, mainly the reading skill, that would enable students to have access to information specifically needed to carry out the purpose of their academic career.

## Languages Taught in Algeria

Broadly speaking, in Algeria people speak dialectal Arabic and Berber in its different varieties: Kabyle, Mzab, Chaoui, Tergui, etc.

Officially and in terms of language teaching:

Arabic is the national and official language.

Berber (Tamazight) is the national language, and it was quite recently recognised as an official language in February 2016, after revisiting the Algerian Constitution)

French (the first foreign language)

English (the second foreign language). So, English is ranked in the fourth position in the Algerian educational system.

Other foreign languages are also taught in Algeria and they include: Spanish, German, Russian, Italian and more recently Chinese and Turkish (because of the recent economic exchanges with these countries in the last two decades).

(For more information about 'The linguistic Situation in Algeria' readers may refer to our doctoral thesis, 2007)

## Language Teaching Problems

At university level, quite often (as discussed in different Master's and doctoral theses) teachers and students alike complain about the teaching of English at science departments:

Teachers complain about the students' low level, and

Students complain about the teaching quality of the English subject.

According to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyceta (2009:1):

*"All language is the language of community, be this a community bound by biological ties, or by the practice of a common discipline or technique. The terms used, their meaning, their definition, can only be understood in the context of the habits, etc. and tradition known to the users of those terms. A deviation from usage requires justification."* (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyceta, in Wikipedia)

So, in order to avoid such a deviation, we need to keep the Algerian scientific community as a discourse community by specifying its different characteristics (based on Swales's six characteristics) and suggesting some prerequisite conditions for teaching / learning English (E.S.P).

## Discourse Community Characteristics

As a true discourse community may be rarer, Swales suggests that 'we need a set of descriptive characteristics for discourse communities' (Swales, in Downs and Wardle, 2011:469)

Therefore, Swales's six discourse community characteristics (1990: 24-27) for describing a discourse community together with Downs and Wardle's (2011) thoughtful discussion of these characteristics allow us to apply them to the Algerian scientific community. This latter:

has a broadly agreed set of common public goals: the scientific members aim to become competent users of English in order to develop their scientific knowledge;

has mechanisms of intercommunication among its members: conferences, published research work (books, scientific articles), etc.;

uses its participatory mechanisms primarily to provide information and feedback: lectures, conferences;

utilizes and hence possesses one or more genres in the communicative furtherance of its aims.

Swales described 'Discourse communities' as groups that have goals and purposes and use communication to achieve these goals. Central to his analysis is the notion of genre; the organisational patterns of written communication which he sees as "belonging to discourse communities".

In addition to owning genres, it has acquired some specific lexis;

A good command of 'the specific genres' and 'the appropriate use of specific lexis' are necessary for the Algerian scientists as access to the scientific discourse community is based mainly on familiarity with the norms of the written language of scientific discourse, because as Rouleau (1995:29) notes "*learning an LSP is, thus, in many respects similar to learning a second language*".

has a threshold level of members with a suitable degree of relevant content and discursual expertise.

So that the Algerian scientific community does not die out, we need a threshold level of members (novices and experts) or in Lave and Wenger's (1991) terms 'newcomers and old-timers'. As teachers, our task is to train learners to be able to join the target discourse community and as such maintain a reasonable ratio between novices and experts.

Therefore, to help our university students at science departments, to become members of the target scientific discourse community, we need to answer specific needs and target various purposes of both learners and teachers:

**Learners:** present users of the target language (English) as graduate students; and future users of the target language (after graduating and joining the target discourse community)

**Teachers:** the aim from teaching ESP is to make the present learners, future competent users.

To reach such purposes, we suggest the following prerequisite conditions for ESP teaching / learning in Algeria.

### **Prerequisite Conditions For Esp Teaching / Learning**

It is hoped that the following prerequisites could be applied and generalised to many university science departments for a better E.S.P. teaching / learning tuition.

#### ***Needs analysis***

An assessment of purposes and needs and the functions, for which English is required / is needed.

Entry and Exit Tests (to evaluate learners' progress)

Skills: in ESL all 4 skills are stressed equally; in ESP a needs analysis determines which language skill(s) is/are needed by students, and the syllabus is designed accordingly, e.g. Reading for Algerian science students, and speaking for tourist guides / hotel receptionists etc.

Once the skill is specified, other prerequisites need to be taken into consideration.

#### ***Pedagogy / Methodology***

Broadly speaking, pedagogy and methodology imply teachers, learners, teaching materials, teaching methods and approaches, and assessment/evaluation. As teaching E.S.P combines subject-matter and English language teaching, we should specify:

°Kinds of teachers:

Who should teach English at science departments? Language teachers or subject-specialists (i.e. a doctor / a biologist / a Chemist, etc.)?

A collaboration of both subject-specialists and English language teachers is most advisable.

°Kinds of English

Which English language to teach: General English or E.S.P?

We should teach English in context i.e. E.S.P.

°Kinds of teaching texts:

Which texts to teach: Authentic texts (authentic scientific articles, etc.) or science texts concocted for teaching purposes?

In order to teach English in context, authentic scientific texts need to be used for such tasks.

°Kinds of syllabi

ESP concentrates more on language in context than on teaching grammar and language structures. So we should think about:

What to teach: grammar or lexis or both?

Which kind of syllabus?

In Algeria, the teaching of English in science departments is still done in a more or less traditional way. So, which syllabus to administer to get a better tuition?

As in all modern societies and with the advent of new technologies, mainly the use of computers, we suggest applying the following syllabi to reach the main purpose of the Algerian society (to move into modernity) as stated in this article introduction.

The lexical syllabus (Willis, D.) in 1990's: With the advent of computers, Willis, D. (1990) suggested the lexical syllabus which is a word-based syllabus. It would specify words, then meanings and the common phrases in which they are used (the lexical item and its co-text).

Through this suggestion, we aim to help learners become familiar with the discipline specific lexis.

The task-based syllabus (Willis, J. (1996): where suggested activities and tasks (about lexis and grammar) should include interactivity among learners, not only simple exercises done individually.

°Material production and Content

Special attention should be given to the selection, design and organisation of the teaching material based on the target discipline and the learners' level and progress.

°Teaching approaches

Which approach is most appropriate for teaching ESP: The communicative approach? The competency-based approach? The corpus-based approach? Or a combination of two or three approaches (Eclectic approach)?

We think that an eclectic approach is advisable to answer students' level of competence, aims and objectives.

° Evaluation

After acquiring the necessary information, learners need to be evaluated to check their progress and to bring the necessary changes to the teaching material if required.

Should the students' evaluation be formative or summative? Or both?

We suggest, to teachers and the department administration, that learners' assessment and evaluation should be done by introducing "the entry and exit tests" and "an on-going evaluation" to gauge the students' progress.

## Conclusion

It is hoped, in this article, that we have managed to reach our purpose of describing the Algerian scientific discourse community using Swales's characteristics and providing the prerequisite conditions for teaching/learning E.S.P. at Algerian universities which we consider as the general guidelines for a better English language tuition. The suggested methodology tries to put forward a more dynamic and interactional teaching / learning situation in which learners develop their linguistic competence by finding out the linguistic items (lexis, grammar, etc.) and concepts related to their subject-discipline (through the lexical syllabus) in order to become autonomous learners in using English language source material (through the task-based syllabus). The above suggestions are made to ease the transfer of scientific knowledge from English language world users to a national English competence community.

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