

## *Redesigning Tertiary Level EFL Courses on a National Scale*

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### **Abstract**

Despite attempts over the last decade to standardise EFL teaching practices in Israeli Higher Education (HE), no overarching guidelines relating to course design have been imposed, leading to ambiguity and lack of mutual recognition between institutions. For over thirty years, the generally accepted approach to English language studies has been to focus on reading skills, requiring students to answer comprehension questions on unseen texts in order to reach an exemption level. Regardless of global developments and new modes of communication, this approach has not been reviewed or revised on a nationwide level, and institutions decide individually whether or not to include oral and written skills in their curriculum. Dramatic changes in tertiary level EFL education in Europe have resulted from the CEFR and Bologna Process, but there is minimal awareness of these developments in Israel. Even initial attempts with English-Medium Instruction have not been sufficiently planned with the necessary infrastructure in terms of English language support. In light of these challenges, and leveraging experience gained in the TEMPUS EFA project, a new partnership has been forged to develop guidelines which will meet twenty-first century needs. This paper presents the collaboration between Israeli and European partners within the TEMPUS ECOSTAR project and the framework for initiating change, introducing professionalization, and advancing standardization of English teaching in Israeli HE.

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## **The need for renewal**

Despite global developments focusing on language learning, especially in Europe (The Bologna Declaration, 1999; Council of Europe, 2001), there have been no top-down guidelines relating to course design for tertiary level English as a Foreign Language (EFL) programmes, in Israel and there is currently no standardisation between institutions. This neglect is surprising considering that English is extensively used in Israel for international communication, academic research, trade and tourism, enabling this small nation to interact on the wider international stage (Symon, 2012). Even though English has not been officially defined as an official language of Israel, it is considered “the most valuable asset of a plurilingual Israeli citizen” after Hebrew and Arabic (Ministry of Education Israel, 2001). English is spoken at all levels of Israeli society and is the foreign language for which there is the greatest demand, since it is seen as essential for a country with strong economic, military and diplomatic connections with the outside world, yet which is largely politically isolated from its regional neighbours.

English is a prerequisite for tertiary level studies in Israel, with acceptance to higher education institutes (HEIs) based on a minimum score in both the high-school matriculation examinations (Bagrut) and the English section of the national psychometric test. This latter score also serves to stream students into the appropriate course levels so that some students may receive an exemption from English language studies while others may have to take up to three consecutive courses during their first two years of undergraduate studies.

The nature of HEI EFL programmes and their narrow focus on reading comprehension was decided upon in the 1970s before the advent of globalization, when primary sources were not available in Hebrew, and thus the perceived need for English was limited to the reading requirements in each course. Unfortunately, the focus of these EFL programmes has barely changed in the last forty years. Reading skills therefore tend to be the most developed of Israeli students’ academic language skills, despite findings from several studies indicating that at least fifty per cent of students have been found to avoid reading, whether for pleasure or for study purposes, not just in English but also in their first language (Weinberg, 2010; Pundak & Maharshak, 2010). The productive skills of speaking and writing have not generally featured as significant elements in these language courses and as such, students’ abilities in these areas are far less developed. Moreover, while students generally begin their English studies in fourth grade, typically leading to nine years of English at school, there is a considerable gap between the matriculation level and the requirements of higher education. Furthermore, following school, a majority of students from the Jewish and Druze populations have three years of compulsory military service, after which many then take an additional break either to travel abroad or to work. Unfortunately, these years between high school and undergraduate studies serve to widen the gap between actual language proficiency and that required for academia.

Further compounding the challenges in tertiary level English language studies is the lack of a national curriculum resulting in the lack of uniformity in language programmes around the country. Consequently, programmes in one HEI are not

recognised by other HEIs and rather than working to build up collaborative relationships, institutions have developed individual programmes which serve their own student population. The losers in the current situation are obviously the students, not just because the courses that they take do not confer instant acceptance by all Israeli HEIs of a common standard reached, thereby constraining domestic mobility, but also because the lack of modernisation and focus on reading comprehension skills precludes achievement in other areas. In comparison, EU language studies place equal emphasis on achieving proficiency in productive as well as receptive skills, thus enhancing graduates' competitive edge in the global jobs market. Twenty-first century language skills require the ability to share and present ideas and opinions clearly and coherently in both spoken and written contexts. The traditional reading comprehension task focuses on using a text to answer a set of questions but not to produce useful and relevant output. This approach needs to change in order to prepare students for the real use to which they will need to put their language skills. Indeed, for success in work and life, higher education as a whole needs to change in order to allow students to acquire relevant skills such as critical thinking, collaboration and communication, and problem solving (Binkley et al, 2012).

During the last decade, the Council for Higher Education (CHE) in Israel has taken measures to try and improve the situation, first with the establishment of a committee within the CHE to examine provisions for English in all HEIs in Israel, leading to the publication of their finalised requirements in 2014, thereby providing the first steps towards uniformity in tertiary English language courses. These regulations stipulate the names of the courses, the number of hours to be taught in each course and the entry score, based on the psychometric test, required for acceptance to each level. The CHE recognises the need to advance from this structural stage to the content stage where learning outcomes and assessment procedures as well as recommended materials can be established. The seemingly straightforward process of setting the entry scores, names and duration of the courses has taken eight years, encountering stiff opposition from some quarters along the way. Thus it can be assumed that the next stage of curriculum renewal will be no less challenging.

In order to create a national curriculum for the teaching of English at tertiary level, steps need to be taken which may at first meet with resistance. However, by using what is already known within the profession, as teachers we can create a learning environment that answers our students' needs, directing change ourselves rather than having it forced upon us by national decision makers who may lack the necessary insight. Revising and redesigning curricula is a long-term process and instead of waiting and trying to predict what the future might bring, it is preferable to be proactive and invent that future (Pellegrino, 2006). By reaching out to the entire body of EFL teachers in HE in Israel, we hope to overcome opposition by promoting debate and by encouraging all to contribute their knowledge and expertise to the process of renewal.

Curriculum development is, of necessity, an iterative process which can respond to changing needs; and while change in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programmes is inevitable, in order to stay relevant to students' needs, innovation is desirable (Stoller, 2001). Responsibility for innovation must be shared and not left to chance, thus feedback from all interested parties and target populations must be sought during the needs analysis phase. An integrated curriculum policy should

represent “the needs of the learners, the needs of the institution or planning committee, the needs, possibly, of society, or at least specific interest groups within society, and also the needs of the teachers and administrators, the implementers of the curriculum” (Finney, 2002:75).

In the European-funded TEMPUS project “English for All in Academia” (EFA) which ran from 2010-2013, a survey, conducted to analyse the situation of EFL in Israeli HE, investigated students’ attitudes towards their EAP courses and their perceived future English needs. The majority of student respondents felt that their English studies were not preparing them sufficiently for the real world, and many felt that more should be gained from the courses. Both students and graduates reported that English courses over-emphasised preparation for reading comprehension exams at the expense of the productive language skills. Findings that emerged from the EFA project showed that a fundamental change is needed in the system as a whole, to close gaps between what is provided by HEIs and what students actually need. For academic studies and the global work environment, graduates are expected to show some proficiency in writing and speaking English (Symon & Broido, 2014), yet approximately 65% of graduates polled within EFA said their professional English language needs were not provided for by the majority of English language courses taken during their studies. In order to achieve the project’s goals and to implement the necessary changes, a new TEMPUS project, “English as the Cornerstone of Sustainable Technology and Research” (ECOSTAR), which is running from 2013 to 2016, brings together experts in the EFL field in Israel and the EU who are collaborating on bringing these challenges to fruition.

### **The ECOSTAR project**

The ECOSTAR project (<http://ecostar.iucc.ac.il>) seeks to modernise and internationalise the HEI EFL curriculum in order to prepare Israeli students to function effectively in the global economy. By building on the top-down approach of the first stage of the standardisation process, initiated by the Israeli CHE in their requirements as described above, a bottom-up approach working with teachers and students in the field now needs to complement this process by addressing content, skills and assessment procedures. ECOSTAR’s mandate, therefore, is to put flesh on the bare bones of the Israeli CHE’s EFL studies programme.

ECOSTAR’s partners will address the problems of the lack of standardization and the absence of specific guidelines regarding what to teach at each level by applying lessons learnt from the EFA project. The whole framework for EFL in HEIs in Israel will therefore be reformed, starting with the lowest entrance levels and continuing through to the exit level. ECOSTAR will, for the first time in Israeli history, create a standardised national framework for tertiary EFL programmes which will be aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) to attain international recognition. There is still minimal formal awareness in Israel of the CEFR since developments in Europe from the Bologna Process have not yet filtered through to local EFL programmes. The project will therefore help to spread knowledge of the CEFR among the EFL teaching body in Israel. To accompany the framework, ECOSTAR will also develop suitable learning packages (LPs) for each of the three main levels to exemplify content and best-practice for achieving the specified learning outcomes. A more balanced focus will be afforded to all communication skills and the

LPs will provide specific guidelines regarding what to teach at each level. This should finally create uniformity and enable inter-institutional recognition both internationally as well as between HEIs in Israel. These aims will be achieved through a series of work packages which run in parallel but progress through learning, connecting and growing as shown below.

## **Learning**

Robust reasons have emerged from the EFA project for the need to replace the existing EFL programme with a new and comprehensive curriculum, and in order to make this happen, suitable options must be explored. While establishing mutual recognition within Israel is a major objective of the ECOSTAR project, aiming for international recognition at the same time is an effective way to leverage the change. Within TEMPUS projects, partner countries such as Israel have the benefit of working with experienced partners from European universities who are able to share their knowledge and expertise in the area, and the first phase of the project has been to learn more about the European approach to language learning. Understanding the Bologna Process, the concepts of the European Language Portfolio, and how this relates to student mobility, together with the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), is the starting point for creating the new national framework for EFL studies in Israeli HEIs. However, rather than attempting to create an entirely new framework which would have no connection to the world beyond Israel's borders, the projects' partners agree that the obvious option to explore for its suitability to the Israeli context, is the CEFR (Council of Europe 2001). Being widely used and accepted in many countries, its European provenance no longer limits it to the European context, testament to its ability to undergo localization. This will facilitate the process of standardization for EAP in Israel, allowing at the same time for the alignment of Israeli HEIs with internationally accepted standards. This in turn will facilitate international collaboration and mobility for students, teachers and researchers.

While ECOSTAR adopts a bottom-up approach to curriculum reform, nevertheless, top-down support from the CHE will be required in order to ensure nationwide implementation. Incentives to encourage adoption of change by teachers in the field would be welcome, but the bottom-up approach in ECOSTAR is designed to pique interest among the EFL community in Israel by making extensive use of existing social and professional networks, supplemented with national and regional seminars to further disseminate the changes taking place. By providing a clear and professional rationale for the intended reforms, based on research and the analysis of data collected in a national needs analysis, resistance to change may be reduced. The provision of professional support as well as a repository of Open Educational Resources (OERs) will help teachers cope with the requirements of the new curriculum while the involvement of the National Institute for Testing and Evaluation will facilitate the move towards alternative and comprehensive assessment techniques. Rather than adopting a punitive and threatening top-down method it is hoped that this grassroots approach will achieve the goals of ECOSTAR through consensus and by alleviating the stress normally associated with change.

## **Connecting**

ECOSTAR's fifteen partner consortium combines the skills of academics from six European and six Israeli HEIs, as well as representatives of the Israeli national student body, the national testing institution and the expertise of the inter-university computational centre. This partnership solidifies existing relationships between some of the partners who worked together on the EFA project, and introduces new partners who bring their own know-how to this new collaboration. Together, the flow of information and discussions will ensure that each stage is carefully analysed and each challenge is confronted by a group of willing collaborators, dedicated to ensuring the success of the project. For example, in our search for a suitable existing framework that might be adapted to our local needs, we have learnt that, whilst not perfect, the CEFR has obvious benefits, in that as a tool for curriculum designers, it provides a common language to help promote standardisation and is widely-used and accepted. The experience of our European partners, in adopting this framework in their own settings, is an outstanding advantage in ensuring that the Israeli experience will benefit from the positive elements while avoiding the pitfalls they have already encountered. In a two-way exchange of information, in creating the Israeli version of the CEFR, solutions to some of the known problems may in turn prove adaptable to the European context.

The prime beneficiaries of the new curriculum will be the students, and central to the project is learning from the students themselves. As has been noted, the starting point is a comprehensive needs analysis and this will be based on a nationwide survey of all affiliated students. Their feedback will be used to guide discussions that will lead to the development of the new framework, and with a representative of the national students' union as an equal partner in the project, their perspective will always be taken into account.

## **Growing**

The three year project is constructed to follow the iterative process necessary in any redesigning of a curriculum: needs analysis, syllabus design, teacher training and development, implementation and evaluation (Finney, 2002). These tasks are allocated within work packages, each led by a different institution and with the collaboration of the other partners.

During the first phase, data from a series of questionnaires administered to the Israeli student body, EFL teachers, content teachers and other stakeholders will be analysed in order for a clear picture of current and future language needs to emerge. Based on these findings, a series of focus group meetings will establish the basis for the Israeli framework. The new curriculum and supporting LPs will be accompanied by a repository of OERs compiled with easy access to materials categorised according to the levels of the new framework. In order to facilitate implementation of the new curriculum, EFL teachers from all over the country will be invited to national and regional seminars where they will learn about the new curriculum and the advantages of its adoption. Training in the form of advanced professional development workshops will be offered to the teachers, and a support system will accompany the

introductory phase, thereby serving the additional aim of ECOSTAR in establishing a professional network which can continue to collaborate within the EFL field.

Together with the new curriculum, the updated learning materials and activities will leverage new technologies in the classroom and beyond. Task- and content-based learning, for example, place the student firmly at the centre of the learning process while favouring materials of relevance to the students' fields of study. This combination can lead to heightened interest and to enhanced learner motivation. The introduction of mobile learning, while exploiting the myriad advantages of Smartphone and tablet apps, also taps into modern behaviour patterns and normalises them in the learning process. Thus ECOSTAR will also investigate the integration of mobile elements into the learning packages.

Finally, as the phenomenon of globalization continues to grow, Israeli higher education is not immune to the added demands for a more international curriculum, for which the preparation of students with excellent English language skills is required. The most common element of the international curriculum is the provision of content courses taught in English, often referred to as English Medium Instruction (EMI). However, there is no formal policy governing EMI in Israel, nor is it common to find national frameworks in other countries providing guidelines on best practice for teaching in English in higher education. Symon & Weinberg (2014) have already recognized that if a coherent language policy is to be developed and implemented at institutional and national level in Israel, and if any linguistic objectives are to be achieved from integrating content and language, considerable planning and infrastructure will be required. As Symon & Weinberg (2013) indicate, in order for students to benefit from EMI, a suitable language support framework needs to be in place. Before embarking on EMI courses, students must have reached a minimal threshold proficiency in English, and course instructors must not only speak English fluently, but must participate in training in the pedagogical aspects of EMI in order to develop sensitivity to students' language needs as well as an understanding of the challenges they will face in assessing assignments and exams fairly, particularly with less proficient students, and for those students for whom English is a third language.

ECOSTAR has set as an additional goal the establishment of a national framework of guidelines for the introduction and implementation of EMI in Israel, and will develop a content course to demonstrate best practice as well as providing the basis for training EFL and content teachers.

### **Challenges ahead**

Any process of change is likely to meet with resistance, particularly where that change will require additional effort to be implemented. Innovation in teaching, learning and assessment requires support at both the institutional and national level if academic staff are going to be asked to invest in learning new skills and evaluating their outcomes (Bull, 1999); moreover, mismatched expectations may translate into student resistance to teachers' pedagogical aims (Nunan, 1995). Furthermore, the problem with top-down imposition of pedagogical change is that it engenders suspicion regarding motives, and encounters resistance in teachers who don't see any intrinsic value or benefit in the new approach over those to which they are accustomed (Gun & Brussino, 1997; Whittington & Sclater, 1998; Bronsan, 1999).

To address the challenge of resistance, ECOSTAR has been formulated as a bottom-up process driven by teachers from the field, thus avoiding imposition from above. Embedded in the ECOSTAR project is a strong focus on communication, including regular face-to-face meetings as well as Skype calls and online forum discussions in order for teachers to share their concerns and search together for alternatives and solutions as problems arise. Furthermore, each part of the project is overseen by individual work package leaders who together with their teams endeavour to pre-empt serious setbacks by engaging in risk-analysis brainstorming sessions addressing relevant issues. By adopting a pro-active approach to the redesigning of the curriculum, and working in close collaboration with European colleagues who have already experienced reforms of this nature, it is hoped that the Israeli experience will be smooth. ECOSTAR is promoting a highly professional and inclusive approach to curriculum design, and is predicated on the understanding that Israeli EFL professionals in higher education are already well aware of the need for change and know that if that change does not come from within the teaching body, then an alternative which may be less to our liking will eventually be imposed from above. The incentive therefore is to be involved in this grassroots movement from the earliest possible stage. We believe the benefits will justify the tremendous effort these reforms require.

Resistance from students is also anticipated, but with the National Students Union as a partner in the process, their interests will be represented throughout the project from within. Widespread dissemination of the project's aims and objectives among the student population should promote understanding of the benefits the reforms to the curriculum will bring and this is expected to mitigate their concerns.

Following identification in the EFA project of the specific needs of the different socio-cultural sectors within the Israeli student population, the ECOSTAR project seeks to address and redress these inequalities by including more representative partners in the consortium. It is hoped therefore that all sectors can impact on the development and implementation stages, although the potential challenges of attempting to standardise programmes for students coming from such varied backgrounds are also recognised.

Piloting of the new framework will be conducted in stages, starting within the ECOSTAR partner institutions themselves, while workshops will be held throughout the project to encourage wider participation of EFL teachers from other HEIs. Finally, for the project to succeed, the new curriculum must be recognised by the CHE. A campaign to disseminate project activities and achievements is designed to target the appropriate authorities and institutions and to ensure that they are informed throughout the lifetime of the project of the progress being made. From an early stage, the CHE is being informed of all project developments, in the hope that long-term objectives can be sustained once the project finishes. As ECOSTAR gradually fulfils the content and assessment aspects of the new curriculum, these will sit comfortably on the scaffolding of the CHE's basic requirements for standardization. It is hoped that within three years, the new curriculum will already be active within a large number of institutions.



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