

Criteria for esp course design

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CRITERIA FOR COURSE DESIGN IN ESP

The purpose of this article is to prove that ESP courses are designed to fulfil a description of the required target performance based on the needs of the students.

«In general, the belief appears to be that there is nothing specific about the learning process of ESP students, but only about the product of their learning»¹.

Therefore, if a group of learners' needs for the language can be accurately specified, then this specification can be used to determine the content of a language programme that will meet these needs. To carry out this practical task, we can first specify what students of industrial, civil engineering technicians or business administration need to be able to do with English by analysing their special subject matters. Then, we can design specialized courses of English according to the results of the needs analysis.

NEEDS ANALYSIS

Prior to the assessment of the possible problems of course design, one must intend to establish in ESP, the language needs of a particular student or group of learners or field of study as accurately as possible so as to consider the different skills he/she will require for his/her needs.

Let's begin by determining the meaning of needs, which is no doubt the basis of any needs analysis. For Richard Berwick², needs means a gap or measurable discrepancy between a current state of affairs and a desired future state. Then the following questions must be considered:

1. Whose needs are we talking about? (Is the course directed to a particular group of students or to a company, for example?).

1. H. G. WIDDOWSON, *Learning Purpose and Language Use*. OUP, England, 1983, pág. 83.

2. RICHARD BERWICK, «Curriculum Design», in *The Second Language Curriculum* (ed.). R. K. Johnson. CUP, England, 1989, pág. 52.

2. Who decides what these needs are? (The teachers themselves or the managers of the company).
3. How can we measure the gap?
4. What do we mean by «state of affairs»? (Does it mean linguistic knowledge?/communicative skills?/transactional tasks? etc).

As a consequence of the questions mentioned above, we can invent a hypothetical situation as we look at approaches to needs analysis. For example:

Your client is a Spanish Computer Technology Manufacturing Company which exports a high proportion of its goods. The learners are a mixture of people, mainly engineering technicians and high management staff, who need English for Professional Purposes. Their present knowledge of English is quite good, according to the company's Managing Director.

Therefore, we can approach the Needs Analysis in two ways. The first one is the Target Language Analysis (TLA) which generally means the language the learners will need to use, for example, formal vs informal language; commercial/business and technical language; business and technical communication through letters, fax, telephone conversations, reports, memos and so on; and the second, the Target Situation Analysis (TSA), that is to say, the situations the learners will have to cope with or the strategies the learners need to communicate or negotiate, for example, doing a presentation, presenting a commercial/industrial product, communicating in business and industry through formal and informal situations, socializing with clients, explaining facts and figures, negotiating through the phone, chairing meetings or participating in discussions etc...

One very important thing we have to bear in mind is that business and industry are inseparable. If we try to list all the needs analysis of any engineering firm, we will find that engineering doesn't solely concentrate on production and maintenance but also on administration and marketing. Once we have understood the close link-up of business and industrial organization, we can proceed with our problem of ESP course design.

QUESTIONNAIRES

Another effective way to survey the needs analysis of our students is to get them to answer questionnaires. It seems that authors like J. Yalden³, T. Hutchinson & A. Waters⁴, V. Hollett et al⁵ all share the same view that the information obtained from the questionnaires should help the course designer.

LEARNER CHARACTERISTICS

Once we have looked at what needs are and their survey, the next step in our study will be to observe more about the learners. Two types of factors come to mind in this connection: learner characteristics (such as attitude, motivation, age, personality) and

3. J. YALDEN, *Principles of Course Design for Language Teaching*. CUP, England, 1987, pág. 133.

4. T. HUTCHINSON & A. WATERS, *ESP: a learning-centred approach*. CUP, England, págs. 62-63.

environmental characteristics (such as the nature and degree of contact with native speakers, socio-economic status, the quality of L2 instruction)⁶.

Not only is the L1 background an important factor, but also the L2 background may play a very important role.

«The L1 is a resource of knowledge which learners will use both consciously and sub-consciously to help them shift the L2 data in the input and to perform as best as they can in the L2. Precisely when and how this resource is put to use depends on a whole host of factors to do with the formal and pragmatic features of the native and target languages (i. e. linguistic factors) on the one hand, and the learner's stage of development and type of language use (i. e. psycho and socio-linguistic factors on the other hand)⁷.

The above factors usually do not operate independently of each other, and it is, therefore, impossible to study them in complete isolation.

SELECTION OF COURSE CONTENT

It is impossible to teach or learn everything of a foreign language, even if there were no limits to the time available: there is no native speaker who has a complete command of all the aspects of his native tongue. In education we shall always have to make do with a limited number of hours that can be spent on ESP English. This makes it all the more imperative that a well founded choice be made. In doing this we should be guided in the first place by the objectives that have been formulated, since it is necessary that the course content is selected in such a way that it enables the students to do what is specified in the objectives. In selecting course content we shall also have to pay attention to a number of other factors, such as the specific level for which the selection is made, and the amount of teaching time available.

SELECTION OF A SYLLABUS TYPE

A good selection of a syllabus content will help to carry out the aims and the objectives specified. Typical syllabus types are⁸:

- a) Structural
- b) Functional
- c) Topic-based
- d) Task-based
- e) Negotiated
- f) Eclectic

5. V. HOLLET et al., *In at the deep End: speaking Activities for Professional People*. OUP, England, 1989, pág. 5.

6. ELS et al., *Applied Linguistics and the Learning and Teaching of Foreign Languages*. Edward Arnold, London, 1984, págs. 102-125.

7. R. ELLIS, *Understanding Second Language Acquisition*. OUP, England, 1985, pág. 40.

8. DAVID NUNAN, *Syllabus Design*. OUP, England, 1988, págs 5-70.

Next, the contents of the protosyllabus are broken up into groups of linguistic items, topics, functions, skills, etc. and arranged into combinations of various sorts to produce what is called the pedagogical syllabus. Other factors we have experienced that would affect the selection of a good syllabus type are:

1. A specification of the settings in which the learner will be able to use the foreign language.
2. The topics he will be able to discuss.
3. The notions/language he will be able to use.
4. The language functions he will be able to fulfil in the foreign language.
5. A precise delineation of the areas (EBP, EST or EAP) within which the selection of language forms should take place⁹.
6. The level of proficiency already attained by the learner. Once the syllabus type is determined, the content of the course can be prepared. And this is done by writing down a rough list of course contents.

AUTHENTIC VS CONSTRUCTED MATERIALS

It is sometimes difficult to determine the correct usage of authentic, adapted or created materials for ESP learners. The material used should interest the students without being too dense in content or structure for both their language levels and their subject-matter levels. Also, whatever the fields of study of the students, they will find the techniques and functions dealt with in the texts are the same as those they find in their special subject matter. This inevitably gives a feeling of authenticity to their EBP or EST English courses and so helps evade the problem or difficulty that these tend to be predetermined.

To make use of authentic materials in the classroom, we need students with fairly solid backgrounds in English. Led by this and by the students' basic business, scientific or technical knowledge, we can select texts over a wide range of subject-matter difficulty, for example, CAD, micro-electronics, digital recordings, automobile manufacturing, Optimum Planning Technology or Just-in-time production organization, etc... One set-back to the use of authentic texts in many cases is that learners who are perfectly capable of understanding the business, scientific or technical principles involved still find handling the English lexis difficult. Moreover, many find even more difficult the often complex rhetorical-grammatical features that virtually all native learners understand with little difficulty.

Adapted materials give the teacher control over the grammatical structures, the technical and subtechnical vocabulary, or even the specific sentence patterns used in ESP such as description, definition, classification and instructions. Therefore, the decision about which type of texts depends on the students' fields of interest, concerning their ability levels in English, their subject-matter knowledge and their academic standing. In

9. ELS et al., *ob. cit.*, págs. 192-193.

fact, as Louis Trimble pointed out «The more advanced the class (advanced in both English and subject matter), the more useful are genuine materials»¹⁰.

DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF CLASSROOM PROCEDURES

The penultimate criterion for ESP course design is to develop and carry out the ordering of the syllabus in the classroom. At this stage, we must specify the «how» methodology we are going to follow. Widdowson advocates a methodology which engages the learners in problem-solving tasks as purposeful activities¹¹. The process of solving such problems would involve a conscious and repeated reference to the formal properties of the language so as to achieve the target language situations. As a consequence, ways of characterizing and ordering the content units of ESP language syllabus do not, then, determine classroom activity. But they may carry implications about what activities might effectively be promoted as consistent with the syllabus rationale.

EVALUATION

The last criterion but not the least important is evaluation of the course, of the learning achieved and so on. Not all tests can be used in all situations. At all stages in the process, feedback to previous steps takes place. Without feedback we would end up with extremely rigid course outlines, which is exactly what we are trying to avoid in contemporary course design for EST and EBP. In many cases the purpose of a test affects the nature of the test and also the nature of measurement. Two criteria are extremely important for the quality of a test, namely reliability and validity¹².

CONCLUSION

In covering new ground for ESP course design and looking at the field in a different manner, we are aware that many issues have been raised in this article which require further expansion and development. However, we hope that Course Design for ESP kindles interest in the relatively unexplored areas of course planning and materials writing for EBP and EST.

We have definitely not tried to promote a particular «method» or «approach» to ESP course planning. We have adopted it to illustrate the framework for ESP course designing which has been developed here.

The perspective presented has been from the point of view of the teacher/designer who plans for learners. Yet, we find that we cannot write about teachers and learners

10. L. TRIMBLE, *English for Science and Technology: A discourse approach*. CUP, 1985, págs 40-41.

11. H. G. WIDDOWSON, *Learning Purpose and Language Use*, *ob. cit.*, pág. 80.

12. ELS et al., *ob. cit.*, págs. 102-125.

sharing in evaluation without, even in this final paragraph, adding the note that to be in accord with the philosophy of humanistic education, learners, too, must be brought into the activity of course planning by working with teachers to establish goals and objectives which are in keeping with their particular needs. In this way, learners engage in designing their own plans for English for Specific Purposes.