ESP COURSE DESIGN: MATCHING LEARNER NEEDS TO AIMS

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Abstract

This paper examines the English language needs of 15 Malay administrative staff in two departments in Universiti Sains Malaysia in an ESP course. The course design was based on a thorough needs analysis taking into accounts needs analysis concepts forwarded by Hutchinson and Waters (1987) and Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998). Findings from the needs analysis guided the course design for the 6 weeks' 'Conversational English' ESP course. Feedback from the ESP learners indicated that the course content was tailor made to suit their needs and wants and contributed to a positive learning experience for the learners who are adult students from a non-native English speaking background.

Introduction

The experience of planning and designing an appropriate course that suits target ESP groups can be very challenging especially for new instructors. ESP instructors of such target groups are often faced with various complexities and problems when they lack the know-how of designing effective courses that will cover the specific language needs of their students. Within the landscape of ESP teaching and learning in a young but rapidly developing country like Malaysia, many instances of ESP teaching and especially of course design are often ad-hoc and not entirely based on comprehensive needs analyses.

Concern about quality ESP courses is always of paramount importance in all educational contexts. Arguably, within the ambit of institutional organizations, the need to devise, design and teach relevant ESP courses to employees is often seen as a short-range activity as most institutions provide very limited planning time before instructors teach courses. Being ever watchful of productivity concerns, most organizations also tend to stipulate many regulations that infringe on ESP teachers' abilities to provide conducive, engaging and relevant lessons for their adult students. Notwithstanding these constraints and obvious productivity-oriented inclinations of many business enterprises, ESP teachers need to be mindful of developing courses that are

learner-centred and help to meet the English language needs of their learners.

Issues in ESP Course Design

The work that has been done in the field of ESP has generally followed the assumption that if a group of learners' English language needs can be accurately specified, then this identification can be used to determine the content of a language programme that will meet these needs (Munby, 1978). Such interpretations were common in the 1970s and 1980s when needs analysis in ESP contexts was widespread in language teaching (Nunan, 1988; Strevens, 1988). Then, such procedures were used as the initial process for the specification of behavioral objectives which then explored different syllabus elements such as functions, notions and lexis in a more detailed manner (Nunan, 1988). To this day, this assumption is generally adhered to by most ESP practitioners when they design or mount a wide variety of ESP courses such as 'English for civil servants; for policemen; for insurance staff; for medical students; for legal staff; for nurses; for human resource personnel etc.' Such ESP courses are also prevalent in a young and rapidly developing country like Malaysia. After gaining independence from the British in 1947, Malaysia underwent necessary changes in her infrastructure, international trade and economy and these transformations established the need for relevant and learner-centred ESP courses in globalised work contexts. Since the 1970s, there has always been a need for ESP courses in various ESP contexts in multicultural, multireligious and multiethnic Malaysia.

ESP researchers are of the view that once learners' specialized needs and special language registers are identified, then relevant teaching materials can be used to teach the course more effectively. When Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) became widespread, more determined efforts were made to design comprehensive LSP syllabus that focused on learners' needs. But needs analysis did not find its remarkable influence and position in LSP until Munby's (1978) approach to needs analysis was introduced. Despite numerous criticisms, many researchers still see the value of using Munby's Communicative Needs Processor as they view it as being contributory in many developmental ways (Jordan, 1997; Phan, 2005).

Needs analysis is neither unique to language teaching nor within language training but it is often seen as being "the corner stone of ESP and leads to a very focused course" (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998: 122). Although there are various ways of interpreting 'needs', the concept of 'learner needs' is often interpreted in two ways:

- as what the learner *wants* to do with the language (*goal-oriented* definition of needs) which relates to terminal objectives or the end of learning; and

- what the learner *needs* to do to actually acquire the language (a *process-oriented* definition) which relates to transitional/means of learning.

Traditionally, the first interpretation was widely used and accepted. However, in today's globalised teaching and learning contexts, ESP courses tend to relate to both at the same time but tend to focus on the process-oriented approach in aligning students' needs with their present working scenarios.

In view of these concerns, Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998: 145) discuss criteria for ESP course design and put forward useful steps for ESP teachers and course designers to consider. They list these concerns surrounding course design in the form of the following questions:

- Should the course be *intensive* or *extensive*?
- Should the learners' performance be *assessed* or *non-assessed*?
- Should the course deal with *immediate needs* or with *delayed needs*?
- Should the role of the teacher be that of the *provider* of knowledge and activities, or should it be as *facilitator* of activities arising from learners' expressed wants?

- Should the course have a *broad* focus or *narrow* focus?
- Should the course be *pre-study* or *pre-experience* or *run parallel* with the study or experience?
- Should the materials be *common-core* or *specific* to learners' study or work?
- Should the group taking the course be *homogenous* or should it be *heterogeneous*?
- Should the course design be *worked out by the language teacher* after consultation with the learners and the institution, or should it be *subject to a process of negotiation* with the learners?

By asking these questions prior to planning course design, the ESP teacher can be better prepared, more so if the teacher has to balance out some of these parameters which are linked to institutional and learner expectations (Dudley-Evans and St. John, 1998). In this respect, these parameters of course design were considered and adhered to by the researcher and will be addressed in the 'findings' section below.

In most instances, the content of any ESP course should only be determined by a comprehensive needs analysis as this first step is seen as being absolutely crucial if ESP practitioners wish to design a course that will maximally benefit their learners (Wright, 2001). In the literature of needs analysis, some of the following aspects are often recommended by experts:

- Placement testing (administering tests designed to assess general English ability and ability to perform adequately in work contexts – this might help determine the starting level of courses in the ESP course)
- Linguistics needs analysis (to identify skill development, linguistic structures, lexical items, language functions and levels of formality)
- Learning needs analysis (identify learners' attitudes towards different kinds of methodology, learning tasks and activities); and
- Learner perceptions analysis (discover learners' perceptions of themselves and others as part of their company culture, and their relationships with people from other company cultures)

In analyzing course design issues in any teaching and learning context, it is generally an accepted fact that the process of matching aim and method is not simply a mechanistic one of finding out what is the aim and then finding an appropriate method to achieve it. With reference to course design matters, an inescapable fact of most needs analysis is the amount of vast information collected and of deciding what may or may not prove to be relevant clues towards resolution of 'hunches' which may or may not be discarded (Alasuutari, 1998). Hence, ESP researchers need to realize that the accumulation of information about their prospective learners' communicative events is a trial and error period and needs to be considered before some of it is discarded as it forms part of the continuous dialectic by which aims and methods, hunches and observations are fine tuned to suit the specific ESP teaching and learning environment.

The Present Study

In order to examine the English language needs of administrative staff working in the International Office and Academic Affairs Departments in Universiti Sains Malaysia, a semi-structured interview was conducted in early June 2006. Prior to this interview, the researcher spoke to two key management personnel from both departments several times to glean their views and perceptions of their employees' English language ability. After these meetings, the researcher requested permission to interview a few of the prospective ESP learners. This interview session was attended by four of the prospective ESP learners on a voluntary basis after they were informed of the fact-finding nature of the interview by their superiors. The researcher set out to investigate the communicative skills that the staff frequently used at their workplace. The interview session with the staff lasted for one hour and the learners were keen to express their views about the type of ESP course they were keen to follow. Being adult learners who deal with a variety of

communication skills on a daily basis, the administrative staff were able to discuss with the researcher their key language difficulties on the occasions that they have to use English at work.

During the interview session, two of the more communicative staff informed the researcher that they had difficulty in some of the following aspects at their jobs: difficulty in understanding accents of foreign postgraduate students from the Middle East, using polite expressions when conversing with foreign and Malaysian students, using firm but polite expressions when dealing with difficult students and using grammatically correct expressions when writing emails, announcements and letters.

The students who attended the ESP course comprised 8 staff from the International Office and 7 staff from the Academic Affairs department. Out of this total, only 4 were male staff. The findings from the interview session revealed that the staff from the Academic Affairs office use minimal English at their workplace as they often speak in Bahasa Melayu (Malay) when they speak to university staff over the phone or on a face-to-face basis. The only occasion they would speak in English would be if they had to handle enquiries (phone or face-to-face) from expatriate university staff who are working on a contract basis in USM. Most written communication at their department is also done in the national language, Bahasa Melayu. However, one of the contract administrative staff (a Filipino) did state that in her capacity as a research assistant at the department, she used English frequently at work as she has to read materials on the Internet, write reports and carry out conversations in English.

In comparison, the staff at the International Office use English on a daily basis as they deal with mostly foreign students (and some Malaysian students too) at the university. Some of the staff say that they frequently have to give briefings or have oral conversations with students about visa regulations and other immigration concerns faced by foreign students. They often deal with foreign students from various countries (such as Indonesia, the Middle East, Japan, Korea, Australia, Finland, Switzerland, Germany etc.) who seek their assistance in relation to their exchange student programmes and their status. Most of the exchange students are undergraduate students who come to USM to study for credit transfers for durations of one to two semesters. Many other foreign students are following Masters or Phd programmes in various academic disciplines in USM and these students often come to the International Office to enquire about their student visas, immigration issues, accommodation needs, support services and academic status. The administrative staff state that they have to learn how to deal with different student personalities and they feel they sometimes lack the English language proficiency and the confidence to communicate effectively in using effective language expressions with these international students.

Based on the feedback gleaned from the semi-structured interview and by collecting sample writing from the students, the researcher was able to analyze the information provided. The authentic written materials from the staff (sample e-mails, faxes and letters) provided useful insights for the writing needs of the students. Analysing their responses and their written documents clearly indicated that this group of ESP learners needed to improve their speaking and writing skills. Although the entire duration of the ESP (Conversation and Writing) course was for 12 weeks, the focus of this paper will be on the first 6 weeks of the Conversational English course.

Findings and Discussion

As discussed earlier, the issues surrounding the ESP course design in the present study followed the parameters of course design suggested by Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998). In this section, each aspect of course design will be discussed together with feedback from the ESP learners:

Extensive course

Upon consultation with key personnel from both departments, the preferred nature of the course

was 'extensive' in nature as the class duration was for 1 ½ hours twice a week over a 6 week duration (total of 18 hours). The classes were held in the conference room at the International Office in USM. This room is well equipped as it has LCD and powerpoint equipment to facilitate the teaching and learning process. All 15 learners had a positive view of this set-up and below are some of their comments:

> *"I like the class hours, from 4:00 – 5:30pm every Tuesday and Thursday evenings. It's suitable to my work schedule as I can still get my office work done" (Female, 36 years old)*

> *"I have no problems. The class times are suitable for me...it's convenient" (Male, 26 years old)*

> *"I like it that I can leave earlier off work to the English class while my other friends are still working" (Female, 32 years old)*

> *"If this course was intensive, like everyday I come only for English class, I don't think I will enjoy the classes because I got a lot of office work daily"(Female, 35 years old)*

> *"Why I like the course? I like the timing... it.doesn't disturb my morning work" (Female, 40 years old)*

These are some general comments gleaned from the respondents after the ESP class was over and 8 of the students came back willingly for two focus group interview sessions with the researcher (each group comprised 4 students). All the students expressed their preference for an extensive ESP course with some students commenting that 'next time we would like to have the conversational English component of the course for a longer duration, say 12 weeks'.

Course Assessment

As the management decided that it was not to be an assessed course, this request was adhered to by the researcher. Notably, the learners were very pleased and some of their comments include: "*luckily there are no tests; otherwise, I won't enjoy it as much*", "*good that there were no marks for all our presentations and role plays....that's why I enjoyed the course*", "*My English is still not good so if you test me, I would have been really scared!*" and "*Thank God!, I did not want to feel like a student again*".

These comments from the focus group interviews do indicate that for this group of adult learners are of the opinion that the non-assessed nature of the ESP course helped them to relax more during the classes as they could participate fully in the lessons without having the anxiety that a test environment evokes.

Course Aims

Essentially, the Conversational English course aims to introduce the staff to effective speaking skills that are regularly used in their daily interactions when dealing with students and academic staff in a wide variety of contexts. The language forms and functions that were taught were contextualized, that is language items and the corresponding skills were taught in relation to the specific situations faced by the administrative staff at their workplace. Table 1 below briefly outlines the key language content of the conversational English course:

Table 1: Course content of Conversational English Class

Week	Key topics	Grammar focus	Duration

1	Introduction to course		3
	• Getting started • Making introductions	Verb tense review Pronouns	
2	Greeting People		3
	• Initiating conversations • Telephone etiquette	Question formation WH-questions Prepositions	
3	Asking for information		3
	• Seeking clarification • Confirming information	Yes/no questions Future & present tense Tag questions	
4	Listening to Instructions/queries		3
	• Understanding queries • Responding to queries	Present continuous tense Vocabulary focus Tag questions	
5	Using polite expressions		3
	• Responding to others • Having conversations • Making brief presentations	Clauses Modals Verb tenses	
6	Discussing issues and confirming details		3
	• Social communication • Everyday office conversations • Contributing ideas and suggestions	Modals Adjectives, adverbs Imperatives Conditional verbs Singular/plural	

Based on student feedback from the focus group interviews, the course content was deemed to be suitable by the students and their comments below show that they felt the methods used to teach matched the course aims:

"I'm very happy with the course as you used many different activities to teach...I enjoyed the sample dialogues you gave us...they are so similar to what I say whenI deal with people at work. Also, I like doing role plays...I know at first I was shy, but after the 3rd class, I wasn't that shy because the other students were enjoying acting out the dialogues" (Female, 34 years old)

"For me, I enjoyed the everyday dialogues too...now I have learned so many

idioms....I never used them before and I enjoy using them now in my daily conversations with my office mates and the students I have to deal with" (Male, 27 years old)

"Every activity was enjoyable... even if I don't use much English at work. I can still use these expressions with other people in public. Yes, it's still relevant and useful for me because English is important, even for us in USM" (Female, 43 years old)

"Some of the activities needed me to plan beforehand so it's like homework, especially the grammar exercises but I enjoyed doing them as they didn't take up much of my time" (Female, 31 years old)

In this respect, the course tackled both the immediate (needs that students have at the time of the course) and delayed (needs that will become significant later) English language needs of the students.

Role of teacher

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) posit the view that the role of the ESP is a very important and controversial one. In many situations, the teacher expects, or is expected, to control the class, to provide information about skills and language or to control the activities. In the present study, the researcher started out playing the role of teacher as a provider of input as the ESP learners were rather passive in the first 3 classes. In the focus group interviews, this was the exact expectation of the learners and most of them said they expected the teacher "to lead what they are to do and learn" and they "felt shy to suggest ways to learn or what language activities we could do in class". However, in the process of getting to know the ESP learners on a personal basis and after taking time to gain their trust and having a better rapport with them, gradually the students began to change their perception of the teacher's role and were willing to negotiate some aspects of their learning: making suggestions that they do more role plays and be given the chance to suggest new topics to discuss.

In one instance, one of the ESP learners asked if the whole class could do a problem-solving activity based on an authentic work problem she was facing with a difficult foreign postgraduate student. When this activity was conducted, the researcher took on the role of a facilitator and encouraged the students to map out the type of activities they wanted to do (e.g. listen to the explanation of the staff, discuss in small groups, present two sets of solutions to her problem and seek her comments on their suggestion). This form of learner engagement was an insightful experience for the students as most of them used teaching resources such as powerpoint to do their small group presentations, used the Internet to source out useful strategies and language expressions to articulate their suggestions. This negotiation of meaning-making by involving the learners was seen to be one of the main highlights of the course and many of the learners singled out this language activity (among a few others) during their focus group interviews with the researcher.

Broad or narrow focus

In the present ESP situation, the course generally had a narrow focus as one of the key aims of the course was to concentrate on a few target communicative events. In this instance, the course focused on everyday conversations and oral communicative events usually practiced by the learners. This was seen as being relevant to the learners' language needs because the key topics that were outlined (shown in Table 1 above) suited the course aims. Some of the student comments included: '*the course is very focused and you taught us the necessary skills that we needed to learn and you didn't waste time teaching us things we don't need to learn*', '*yes, it was a relevant course*'.

Course materials

In designing the course, the researcher used common core material (material that uses carrier content which is either of a general academic nature or of a general professional nature). As the job nature of this group of learners involves using general English to deal with people at work, most of the materials were matched to the specific language expressions that they used at work. The researcher did not use any prescribed workbooks on general English. Instead, other than some general grammar exercises, the researcher designed role plays, conversations and dialogues that match real-life situations at their workplaces: addressing a student's enquiries about visa application, signing up for semester courses, discussing work problems with colleagues, giving directions to various locations on campus, congratulating a staff who got a promotion, discussing heavy workloads, discussing weekend plans, organizing a seminar for exchange students, making suggestions for organizing a Cultural Night for foreign students.

The focus group interviews revealed that most of the students had favourable opinions about the materials used in class. The following are excerpts from students' comments:

> *"I enjoyed the module given to us. It has many relevant everyday examples"*

> *"I'm going to treasure the idiomatic expressions in the sample conversations andI plan to use most of them at work. I'm also teaching my other colleagues at work and they are eager to learn more idiomatic expressions from me"*

> *"I like the dialogues in the worksheets you prepared. They are very similar to what I say to foreign students who come to see me"*

Conclusion

By making ESP teaching learner-centred, the students in this study were able to perceive positive learning experiences even though they exhibited passive learning behaviours in the first few classes. Most experts view learner-centred learning as a major paradigm shift in ESP teaching (Nunan, 1988; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Dudley-Evan & St. John, 1998). In such an environment, the focus is shifted to the constructive role of the learner, which differentiates it from a teacher-centred model in which knowledge is transmitted from teacher to learner. When ESP learners take some responsibility for their own learning and are invited to negotiate some aspects of the course design, the subject matter and course content has relevance for the learner as they feel motivated to become more involved in their learning and often seem to participate more actively in class.

The learning process within many ESP environments is often dominated by the dissonance which arises when a comparison is made between what students aim to achieve from a given course with the methods used to achieve these aims. This study has attempted to identify and explain some issues for ESP course design and explain how involving the learners in the learning process can yield positive learning experiences among adult ESP learners as they bring rich work experiences which should be tapped into as effective learning resources. By involving students in some elements of course design, ESP teachers can look forward to enhancing their students' English literacy development as an aid to developing success in their learning.

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