An ESP Course for Employees at the American University of Beirut

Kassim Shaaban

American University of Beirut

Abstract

During the academic year 2003-2004, the American University of Beirut (AUB) felt the need to improve the level of communication in English of its employees who were increasingly coming in contact with English-speaking faculty, employees, and guests of the University. A needs analysis survey was conducted in order to help the program administrators identify the objective communicative needs of the employees and the learning outcomes sought. The course *English for AUB Employees* was developed to address the identified needs and expectations. It followed the models of workplace English, especially the integrative model suggested by Sifakis (2003) in which the ESP teacher is to take into account the "adulthood-oriented considerations" and apply communicative methodology that stresses the development of certain communicative strategies (such as autonomous learning techniques, cooperative learning, and project work) and the promotion of the role of the teacher as a counselor-facilitator. At the end of the course, teachers were asked to reflect on their experience and report it in the form of their own personal story with the course. The content analysis of responses showed that teachers highly valued the experience and were satisfied with the course design, the students' attitudes, their students' performance, and instructional materials.

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1. Introduction

 A few years after the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990) came to an end, the American University of Beirut (AUB) resumed its practice of enrolling foreign students, thus attracting foreign faculty and foreign visitors. AUB has also been included in the list of places for tourists and guests of the country to visit in Lebanon. As a result, the AUB administration felt compelled to establish a visitors' bureau to help welcome visitors to campus. As a result of this influx of foreign nationals, university employees were increasingly coming in contact with people who did not necessarily communicate in Arabic. Employees at the comptroller's office, library, security office, and physical plant, as well as gardeners and building custodians found themselves in the situation when they were asked questions in English by people coming from all over the world. The enquiries they received ranged from asking for directions to questions about administrative procedures, to queries about the names of plants or academic, financial, and social matters. All this made the

University administrators aware of the need to teach all those concerned functional English relating to their area of work.

In order to ensure that guests and clients of AUB receive the services they expect from the institution of such standing, the University decided to offer a course in workplace English for its employees who seemed to need it. The Human Resources Department (Personnel Office) approached the Center for English Language Research and Teaching (CELRT) with the request that a special program be designed to teach basic English communication skills to University employees who had little, if any, proficiency in the language. After consultation with the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences regarding the structure and faculty of the program, CELRT proposed a program that was modeled after workplace English programs designed for similar purposes in the United States.

In response to the initiative of the University administration, CELRT conducted a needs analysis survey to identify the perceived English language communication needs of the employees in their domains of expertise. On the basis of the survey findings, a "workplace" type of curriculum was prepared; suitable textbooks and instructional materials were identified; and qualified faculty were chosen for the implementation of the program. The present paper describes the program and reports on how it came to existence and how the faculty perceived the experience they were involved in for the first time in their professional career.

2. Program structure

2.1. Needs Analysis

The needs analysis survey conducted was a combination of the target situation analysis and present-situation analysis (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; West, 1994). The first step was to find out about the employees' background of learning English. The results of the survey showed that it varied significantly among the employees. Many of them, especially manual workers, had had little exposure as they had not gone beyond elementary education, while others had had more exposure, having completed their high school education and, in some cases, done some college work. However, the general proficiency in English was found to be rather low.

Thus, it became obvious to program designers that "the average academic-oriented ESL instruction is often ill fit for those employees whose academic training is barely on the elementary school level. These approaches tend to intimidate them, a state which is counterproductive to language learning" (Horvath, 1998).

Interviews were conducted with personnel officers, supervisors, and a sample of the employees themselves. Meetings with the middle management (employees' supervisors) and top administrators (Personnel Office manages) showed that the employees needed functional English in their work. It was also felt that the English program could address some other issues - to develop a keen sense of responsibility, longer attention span, patience, and team work - as part of the curriculum.

The employees were found to be keenly aware of the need to invest their time and effort in learning English. Furthermore, they seemed to place a high premium on succeeding in the course. They also showed great respect for those who were going to teach them.

The information collected from all these people was collated and analyzed; then, similar workplace English program designs were consulted. The following program was then conceived and discussed with the people concerned (administrators, employee supervisors, employees, and faculty) before moving into the implementation phase.

2.2. Program design

 The proposed program tried to address the specific English language needs of the learners through designing a workplace course that takes into consideration the following components identified in methodological literature as indispensable for the success of such a course: 1) systematic analysis of the English language literacy requirements on the job; 2) active on-going involvement of learners in determining the type of tasks they need to perform and the English language literacy levels necessary for carrying out these tasks; 3) active involvement by project partners (supervisors, personnel officers, and teachers) in planning, designing, and operating classes; and 4) selection and development of instructional materials related to literacy skills actually required on the job (Pelavin Associates, 1991). Thus, what characterized the course design was its principled flexibility - developing a negotiated curriculum that allowed for modifications which could be made to it on the suggestion of any of the parties involved in the process.

Furthermore, the program went beyond the traditional approach of preparing learners for job-specific communicative tasks to include a critical attitude that allows learners to transfer and apply their already acquired knowledge to new situations in a learning environment that is likely to experience evolution and continuous change and the tools the learners need to cope with that environment. Learners were, therefore, trained in how to develop "the ability to think, reason, question, and to search out facts" (Pandey, 1989, p. 6). The tasks and activities that learners need to perform on the job were identified at the content and rhetorical levels (Tarone & Yule, 1989). In addition, the program adopted " . a more holistic view of … students … which recognizes the personal as well as the academic dimensions … [and] the importance of a supportive and nurturing environment" (Gonzales, 1997, p. 63) through involving them in choosing topics for classroom discussion and through offering rewards for those who successfully complete the course. The language skills and instructional strategies emphasized are presented below, together with a tentative course outline which illustrates the tasks making up the core of the course.

2.3. Language skills and instructional strategies

 The program emphasized the integration of the language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing and the incorporation of grammar and vocabulary in the four skills. A learner-centered approach to instruction was adopted, the approach involving the following:

1. Integration of all the skills to reflect the natural order of language acquisition.
2. Use of authentic language tasks in the classroom.
3. Emphasis on collaborative work in the form of cooperative learning dyads and 4-5 member groups in order to take advantage of the interaction involved in collaboration.
4. Use of visual and aural stimuli for language learning to help in the presentation and illustration of the written text.
5. Use of simulated and authentic activities that help learners transfer what they learn in the classroom to the context they operate in.
6. Integration of cultural skills with newly-acquired linguistic skills.
7. Use of active learning and communicative techniques and activities such as Total Physical Response, Language Experience Approach, role playing, dialog journals, and graphic organizers.

2.4. Tentative curriculum topics

 The tentative curriculum topics suggested below were largely based on the work of Grognet (1996). The choice of these topics came as a result of consultations held with the administrators, program director, instructors, and the learners themselves.

1. **Basic social English communication**

   - Greetings
   - Introducing oneself and others
   - Asking questions
   - Courtesy expressions
   - Reporting problems
   - Calling in sick
   - Turn taking rituals
   - Asking and giving clarifications
   - Making requests and suggestions
   - Using proper forms of address

2. **Following Directions and Instructions**

   - Understanding chronological, spatial and logical sequencing
   - Responding to directions
   - Asking for, following, and giving directions
   - Understanding and abiding by worksite rules
   - Understanding and following safety regulations

3. **Work-related Terms and Expressions**

   - Description of one's job
   - Enumeration and description of work tasks
   - Description of tools, equipment, and machinery used
   - Identification of products and processes

4. Institutional Cultural Factors

   - Personal hygiene, habits, and appearance
   - Cultural values (tolerance, dialogue, hospitality, respect, etc…)
   - Understanding workplace hierarchies
   - Understanding "unwritten rules"
   - Developing problem-solving strategies

5. University Organization and Culture

   - Management functions
   - Union functions
   - Personnel policies, procedures, and benefits
   - Performance appraisal
   - Rewards and awards

6. Professional Development

   - Understanding career opportunities
   - Understanding the need for training
   - Understanding what a "valued" employee is

Some modifications were made to this program in light of the interaction with the learners. For example, upon the request of the learners, more writing activities (e-mail messages, letters, faxes, and reports) were introduced into the program to cover what they felt were immediate needs.

2.5. Duration of the program

The University administration decided that employees joining the program could take the course for one, two, or three semesters depending on their entry level as well as on the communicative targets that needed to be achieved.

It was made clear to all those concerned, administrators and learners alike, that they should realize that it takes time to acquire, reinforce, and build on literacy skills. "Workplace literacy is a long-term and ongoing process. Successful programs run for several modules … and promote teacher/learner collaboration in deciding how long the learner will continue (Pharness, 1991 in Isserlis, 1991).

It remains to be said that the present study reports on the first semester of the program operation. The course lasted for 10 weeks at the rate of 6 hours per week distributed over two or three afternoons

2.6. Placement and promotion in the program

All 122 participants chosen by the Personnel Office were assigned a learning level (beginning, intermediate, and high intermediate) based on their performance on the Elementary English Test (EET) which is a standardized test normally administered, scored, and analyzed by the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment (OIRA). They were put into 4 groups: 3 beginning and 1 intermediate.

Other specially prepared diagnostic tests were used after learners were placed in their respective classes to test the mastery level of various language skills.

Regarding exit from a course, it was established and announced that promotion to a higher level was not automatic; learners must demonstrate that they have successfully met the instructional objectives set for the current level. The exit examinations were achievement tests designed by the teachers of each level in order to measure learning outcomes.

2.7. Learner evaluation

In addition to traditional achievement tests and quizzes, the learners' progress was measured with alternative forms of assessment that are more qualitative in nature, such as portfolios, focused observations with checklists, self and peer assessment, interviews, projects, oral presentations, and conferences.

The final examination for the elementary level consisted of three parts: a cloze test (50%) that helped to assess the employees' ability to use the language learnt to communicate ideas and messages related to the workplace; an oral interview (30%) that checked the employees' ability to express themselves in situations related to the workplace; and a question-and-answer written part (20%) that checked the structures and vocabulary they have acquired. The grade at the final exam represented 60% of the course grade; the remaining 40% was based on daily performance, assessed through tests and quizzes and alternative assessment procedures.

The final examination for the intermediate level consisted of a reading part (passage comprehension and sentence completion) and a writing part where the students were asked to write on a familiar topic.

2.8. Program staffing

The seven faculty members who taught in the program came from the current faculty of the English Department; they were asked to teach an extra course for additional remuneration. As the experience was totally new to them, a training session was held in which the teachers were

introduced to the program, with emphasis made on its special features. The teachers were asked to take into account the fact that the participants were adult learners, who had been away from the classroom for a long time, and that the atmosphere should be relaxed and conducive to participation in learning activities. They were given a briefing of EFL/ESL humanistic-affective teaching methodology (Cooperative Learning, Total Physical Response, Natural Approach, process writing, interactive reading and listening, and active learning) that should be applied in the classroom. It was stressed that the learners should be provided with opportunities to express themselves, participate in activities, take part in discussions.

The Director of the program was an ex-director of the intensive English program at the University with experience in administration, course design, material development, and assessment. She was a full-time instructor who, in addition to administrative duties, had 6-9 hours of teaching.

2.9. Instructional materials

In addition to a textbook, work-related materials were provided by the learners themselves or by the administrative units they belonged to. The textbook used was *Expressions: Meaningful English Communication* published by Heinle and Heinle.

The first book of the series, called *Intro,* was used for the beginning level; it consisted of a student's book and a student audio CD. Book 2 of the series was used for the intermediate level; it consisted of a student's book and a workbook. Each of the two books had a detailed teacher's book. The authentic work-related AUB instructional materials which were also used included memoranda, handbooks, rules and regulations, and reports; other resources included internet sites for adult learners and basic vocabulary and structure from a variety of ESL textbooks.

3. Teachers' reactions

The teachers of the course were asked to reflect on their experience of teaching University employees and to present the results in the form of a narrative. They were expected to comment on the various aspects of the program which they had observed evolving since the time of the project launch. More specifically, they were invited to comment on: a) the students' abilities, performance, and attitudes, b) the problems faced and the solutions devised, c) the instructional methods and materials, d)their overall impression of the program. Five out of the seven teachers involved responded in detail reflecting all aspects of the program; one teacher wrote a short paragraph talking in generalities about how interesting the program was for her; and one teacher did not respond. Below is the summary of their responses.

3.1. Student performance

The instructors felt that there was a significant improvement in the English language proficiency of the students, as measured by the various formal and informal assessment techniques used in the course. Furthermore, it was felt that students with a high level of motivation - especially those who work in the library, benefits office, and personnel - felt positive about their performance. The following quotations from the instructors' responses illustrate their impressions of the progress made by their students and perceived reasons for these gains:

- "A great improvement in many of the students in grammar, writing, and vocabulary."
- "Library, Benefits, and Personnel employees were the best and most motivated. They did every homework asked of them, worked hard, participated often, and had a positive attitude."
- "Some students were more aware of the significance and relevance of the course to their work."
- "Most students tried to speak English most of the time."
- "In a number of cases, students showed visible progress within a very short period of

time."

3.2. Students' behavior and attitudes

It is obvious from the responses quoted below that the teachers felt their job was made easy by the fact that the learners demonstrated a high degree of maturity, motivation, enthusiasm, and respect for the teachers. Furthermore, the cooperative learning model adopted as a framework for classroom interaction and the fact that the learners shared the AUB experience and culture helped in making classroom activities enjoyable and productive. The teachers also felt that they were able to effect changes in the learners' perceptions of the language learning process. The following quotations from the teachers' responses highlight the belief that the positive learners' attitude, the familiar and rich teaching context, and the cooperative learning model made for effective language instruction.

- "Students showed great deference towards the teachers."
- "Students were mature, enthusiastic, and polite."
- "Students showed desire and willingness to learn."
- "Learners were highly motivated."
- "Employees demonstrated self-confidence as learners by politely demonstrating their acquired language abilities through helping and correcting others in their cooperative learning group or in the class as a whole."
- "Employees had a sense of group identity as adults who belong to the same AUB culture and share experiences which were put to use in classroom discussions in relation to some learning activities."
- "Enthusiasm and motivation were demonstrated by the fact that they try to make use of any opportunity to practice their English. At the gate, the security guards greet us and try to exchange a few words of English with us."
- "Students expected to be taught grammar rules and vocabulary lists to memorize. However, they ended up changing such pre-conceived notions about language learning and teaching."
- "In all cases, though to varying degrees, there was a positive change in attitude and participation. All students have become very involved. Cooperative Learning works."

3.3. Issues faced

The implementation of the proposed program revealed certain weaknesses and shortcomings that all those concerned (teachers, administrators, and learners) worked closely together to try to remedy in order to maintain the proper pace of the course. The first major issue was the misplacement of students in different proficiency groups. It was easy to move a learner up a level if his class performance warranted it, but moving a learner down a level proved difficult – the learners concerned did not accept it easily. In order to avoid complications, a decision was made not to announce placement results until all the participants have been given diagnostic tests.

Yet another problem was the large size of groups, with an average of 31 students per class. The instructors tried to reduce the negative effect of such an arrangement by using cooperative ways of interaction that involved heterogeneous groups of 4-5 learners working together on activities and learning tasks. The structures that seemed to be most effective were STAD, Mixer Review, Jigsaw II, Round Robin, Information Gap, Think-Pair-Share, Talking Tokens and Co-op Co-op taken from Kessler (1992).

The third problem was the discomfort felt by those learners who had been placed in the same class with their superiors; their discomfort manifested itself in the form of silence or avoiding eye contact with the supervisors. The program administrators encouraged the supervisors to help diffuse the tension by working in the same groups with their subordinates and encouraging them to participate, which proved partially successful.

The fourth problem was excessive use of Arabic during class activities. The program administrators felt that using some Arabic, especially at the beginning stages, is acceptable and beneficial, but having conversations completely in Arabic could be counterproductive. Therefore, the domains in which use of Arabic was allowed (such as explaining difficult vocabulary and idiomatic expressions, clarification of what is said, and the like) were determined and communicated to the teachers.

The following statements illustrate the problems identified by the teachers:

- "Wrong placement of students in proficiency groups"
- "Number of students in class rather high"
- "Older people felt embarrassed to be back in school and hated to be corrected by their classmates."
- "Differences in their positions at work created a sense of intimidation amongst learners who tended to speak less or become silent when their superior spoke."
- "I had to resort to using L1 to explain some vocabulary, grammar structures, and instructional strategies to ensure that the students were not completely lost or excluded."
- "If the teacher did not use L1, more competent students did so to help their weak classmate, especially when working in groups."

3.4. Instructional methods and materials

The instructors felt that the involvement of the learners as well as their supervisors in the decisions about the nature of the syllabus, the use of humanistic-affective teaching methods and techniques, and the variety in instructional materials used have all contributed to creating an atmosphere conducive to learning and effective classroom interaction. The following statements by the instructors in the program illustrate this:

- "Teachers negotiated the detailed syllabus and prepared lesson plans accordingly. The fact that students had input into what they were going to learn made the experience more enjoyable and productive."
- "Teachers used role plays and simulations very successfully, especially with topics and situations of direct relevance to the participants' jobs."
- "Group work helped solve the problem of different proficiency levels partially."
- The planning process for every session involved deciding on "a combination of textbook materials", using "workplace specifics", and reflection "on how the participants would receive, process, retain, and utilize the information."

3.5. Overall evaluation of experience

The program instructors were unanimous in their feeling that the experience was positive and enriching for them, being different from what they had done before. The following statements made by the teachers attest to this:

- "Enjoyable and rewarding experience"
- "Quite an interesting experience"
- "Very Positive experience"
- "Beneficial experience for students and teachers, one that is worth continuing."
- "A different experience. An eye-opener."

4. Discussion

The first semester of the English language course for University employees was considered by all those involved to have been successful and effective in meeting the targets set. The course is now

in its third semester and will involve, in addition to its regular clientele, employees of the University Hospital whose superiors felt that they could benefit from a similar workplace English program tailored to their needs. However, this does not mean that the program was problem-free. In fact, there were quite a few complications and shortcomings, some of which were dealt with while others are still waiting for solutions.

The course objectives and expected learning outcomes were suitable, since they had been agreed upon by the participants, program designers, and supervisors. The learning tasks and activities had " å high surrender value', meaning that the students would be able to immediately use what they learned to perform their jobs more effectively" (Edwards, 2000, p. 292). These two aspects of the course, namely, the negotiated syllabus and the transferable skills, helped create a relaxed and productive learning environment. However, the presence of supervisors and their subordinates in the same class created discomfort, which resulted in some learners dropping the course. One possible solution is to have these two categories in different classes, especially considering that the pool of participants is large enough to allow for classes that consist of people who have similar work situations.

Another aspect of the program that needs to be looked into, according to the course instructors, relates to available space and facilities. The current set-up allows for the use of one classroom only, with some groups having to meet twice a week for three hours. Our experience has shown that three-hour-long classes should be avoided to provide conditions for students to assimilate and retain what they learn without getting tired or bored. The instructors also pointed out that better teaching aids should be made available. Currently, there are only cassette players and overhead projectors in the classroom; adding computers and an LCD would definitely enrich the learning context. These recommendations are being given serious consideration, together with the idea of establishing a resource center with a writing/reading clinic.

5. Conclusion

This paper described the design of a workplace English course at the American University of Beirut with the target audience consisting of University employees who included janitors, gardeners, security guards, library staff, and Comptroller's Office staff. The course design was based on the needs analysis profile developed for the course participants. This design was modified as teachers and students started classroom interaction, resulting in a negotiated syllabus that everyone involved seemed to approve and accept.

The evaluation of the course by participating instructors was very positive mainly, according to them, because the course reflected both the learners' needs and the teaching goals. These instructors attributed the effectiveness of the program

in the first place to the learners' positive attitudes and motivation reflected in their desire for improvement, eagerness to participate, traits considered by Mezirow (1991) to be essential for the success of ESP programs. Last, but not least, the adoption by instructors of the role of facilitators or counselors and their fostering of a learner-centered environment helped the course participants develop problem-solving and critical thinking skills which they need to become autonomous learners of English in the future.

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