

DESIGNING AN ESP COURSE – A CASE STUDY

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Having its roots in the first years after the Second World War, when the huge, unprecedented expansion of science, technology and business urgently required an international language for specialists, ESP (English for Specific/Special Purposes) has witnessed a rapid and steady development, becoming nowadays one of the most important branches of English Language Teaching (ELT). Being two different branches of the same trunk, ESP and GE (General English) share the same principles of language teaching, having effective and efficient learning as a main objective. According to Hutchinson and Waters [3], the main difference between ESP and GE lies in the *awareness of a need*. ESP learners are current or future specialists who need English for their specific area and who are aware of their need; they know exactly what they need English for; they know what the ESP course should offer them. ESP is not considered therefore a language product, but rather an *approach* to language teaching which focuses on learner's needs, an approach in which all decisions "as to content and method are based on the learner's reason for learning" [3, p.19].

Since ESP is – as Hutchinson and Waters define it – "an approach to language teaching which aims to meet the needs of particular learners" [3, p.21], it seems that much of an ESP teacher's work consists in designing the appropriate course for a particular group of learners. Which leads us to the purpose of this paper: what I shall try to do in this article is to show the steps that an ESP teacher could take when designing a course for a group of specialists. As indicated by the title, the article is going to present a case study, focusing on designing a course for a particular group of specialists: students in Tourism.

Setting the objectives

The first step in designing a language course is deciding on its general and specific teaching objectives. As stated by Ellis and Johnson, the course objectives are "the goals of a course in English, as

indicated by the needs analysis, and expressed in terms of what the learner should be able to do" [2, p.221]. In other words, the course objectives are set in relation to the learners' own objectives in learning the language. As the general objective of an ESP course is to "enable learners to function adequately in a target situation" [3, p.13], we need to identify the *target situation*, i.e. the situation in which the learners will use the language. The target situation will vary, of course, from one group of specialists to another. This process of identifying learners' needs is usually known as *needs analysis* (according to Hutchinson and Waters) or *target situation analysis*.

After the target learners have been identified (students in Tourism in our case), one has to go thoroughly through the process of obtaining a detailed description of the learners' needs, taking into account the specific purposes for which learners will use the language in their jobs, the kind of language required in their field, the starting level of proficiency and the target level envisaged. This stage is extremely important; it is the guiding line in the whole process of ESP course designing, on the basis of which the specific course objectives can be defined. In this process, one has to establish first of all what the learners' *necessities* are, by:

- analysing their curriculum; they may need to read some books/articles which are related to their main subjects (Economics, Geography, Mathematics...) and which are available only in English;
- identifying all areas where they may work after graduating (hotel, restaurant, travel agency, etc.), all types of jobs they may find (tour guide, hotel manager, restaurant manager, travel agent, etc.);
- analysing the situations they are likely to find themselves in while attending university courses or after graduating: they are supposed to be able to speak to a customer, to answer his/her questions, to advertise the services offered by their travel agency, to give information on a certain monument or museum, etc.

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All the pieces of information necessary for this first stage of *needs analysis* are to be gathered by the course designer mainly through observation, data collection (e.g. gathering information about the target learners' curriculum, about their main subjects or about their future jobs), consultations with other course designers or with the target learners themselves.

This first stage of *needs analysis* offers information on both the content and the form that the course should take. It is supposed to answer four major questions that are usually asked before starting to design an ESP course: WHO - target learners (students in Tourism in our case), WHY (their reasons for attending an ESP course), WHERE (the location of the ESP course – be it the classroom, the office or other working environment) and WHEN (the duration and frequency of these ESP courses). It also offers information on the skills that are most required in the target situation. Taking into account students' necessities shortly presented above, the specific objectives of the course are:

- developing the learners' *listening* and *speaking* skills to enable them to communicate effectively in direct contacts with customers, visitors, foreign colleagues, etc.
- developing the students' *reading* skills to ensure their comprehension of new materials related to their profession
- training learners to write a business letter, a contract, an advertisement, an offer (writing skills).

After having determined students' *necessities*, the following step would be to determine their *lacks*. The course designer has to establish students' proficiency level before proceeding with his/her course designing. He/she should establish first what the target learners already know in order to decide what they still need to learn. As Hutchinson and Waters put it, "the target proficiency needs to be matched against the existing proficiency of the learners" [3, p.56].

This second step of the needs analysis is to be done mainly through tests that the ESP teacher gives his/her students during their first meeting. These tests are meant to establish the students' proficiency in English as well as the main lacks that have to be covered during the ESP course.

Besides *necessities* and *lacks* there is another aspect that should be taken into account when designing an ESP course: target learners' *wants*. Learners' motivation is an important issue that should never be neglected, especially by an ESP teacher. Because, as Davies and Currie put it, "a method which frustrates the predictions of the learner is patently bad" [1]. The teacher should try to find out what the student expects from the ESP course and he/she should do his/her best to design his/her course according to learners'

motivation. This third stage in a *needs analysis* is usually accomplished through questionnaires and discussions with the students. The result of these enquiries may sometimes show that there is a conflict between learners' *necessities* (as perceived by the teacher) and their *wants*. The ESP teacher is expected to find some sort of compromise between these conflicting forces by designing a course that should be both useful and interesting for the target learners.

We have managed to answer so far two important questions involved in the designing of an ESP course: WHO? and WHY? (which cover most of a *needs analysis* process). But the designer's work does not stop here; he/she has to answer two other important questions: HOW? and WHAT?

Teaching theory

While the analysis of the target situation is mainly concerned with *language use* (the specific situations in which learners are going to use the language), there is another aspect that should not be neglected in the process of ESP course design: *language learning*. HOW are the students going to learn, which are the theories on teaching and learning that the teacher should apply during his/her courses?

The *communicative approach* to teaching seems to be not only a modern method, but also – in my opinion – the most appropriate teaching theory for an ESP course. It has been stated that "language learning comes about through using language communicatively, rather than through practising language skills" [7, p.72]. This statement seems to be true especially for ESP learners, since they are fully aware of their needs in learning a foreign language. Their main purpose being the ability to communicate effectively in a given situation, they should be taught how to use the language for real communication. The goal of the teacher who uses the *communicative approach* is to "have one's students become communicatively competent" [6, p.131]. This seems to match the ESP teacher's goal, since "communicative competence involves being able to use the language appropriate to a given social context" [6].

The *communicative approach* to language teaching is a well-structured, complex theory, with a lot of principles and methods. Not all of these methods are to be used in an ESP course; the teacher is supposed to choose from among them the ones that best fit both his/her intentions and his/her students' expectations. I am going to shortly introduce now some of the principles that seem to be suitable - from my point of view - to an ESP course:

- the target language is not just an object of study, it is also the means of communication during the course. The target learners are not expected to

learn *about the language*, they are expected to learn the language *through using it*. Using English as a vehicle for classroom communication gives the students a chance of practising and improving their already acquired skills; they are also given the chance to express their own ideas and opinions on the issues under discussion;

- the teacher should introduce “authentic language” – language as it is used by native speakers in real life situations – as often as possible. Since the target learners are current / future specialists who need English for their profession, it is extremely important that they should be exposed to authentic language as frequently as possible;
- the teacher, who acts now as an *advisor*, has to establish situations that trigger interaction, he/she has to provide activities and tasks that involve real communication. Thus, “students will be more motivated to study a foreign language since they will feel they are learning to do something useful with the language they study”[6, p.133];
- all the four skills (*speaking, listening, reading and writing*) may be successfully used in one single course;
- the main issues concerning grammar and vocabulary are inferred from the communication itself;
- the main techniques used during a course based on the communicative approach – information gap, choice, and feedback – are interesting and appealing to the students, being therefore extremely useful.

Focusing on this *communicative approach* does not mean using it thoroughly or exclusively. The teacher should make a careful selection, taking into account learners’ *necessities, lacks* and *wants*, as well as the conclusions he/she drew after having completed the *needs analysis*. He/she may leave out some of the principles of the communicative approach, if they do not seem to fit his/her intentions (such as, for instance, the idea of tolerating errors, seen as a natural stage in the process of developing the communication skills, when teaching business letter writing, where accuracy is essential); he/she may also choose principles belonging to other teaching methods, such as the *grammar-translation method* or the *direct method*. The best approach to language teaching for an ESP course is probably an eclectic one, an approach that combines principles and ideas taken from several different teaching methods.

Materials

The ESP course designing process involves one last major question: WHAT exactly are the materials used

during the course? After having completed the needs analysis, after having chosen the teaching theory, the teacher has to decide what materials he/she is going to use with his/her students. He/she has three possibilities of actually transforming his/her course design in teaching materials:

- materials evaluation = a process of selecting from already existing materials;
- materials development = a process of writing new materials;
- materials adaptation = a process of selecting and modifying existing materials.

The choice of one of these possibilities depends not only on the result of the *needs analysis* process or on the materials available, but also on the teacher’s experience in teaching ESP courses. One needs serious training and teaching experience to be able to write new materials. I would say that *materials development* should be a task only for professional course designers or for teachers who have considerable teaching experience. *Materials evaluation* seems to me to be a better and handier choice for a teacher who tries to design an ESP course for a particular group of students. It offers him/her the possibility of choosing from among many materials developed by specialists, of combining them according to his/her learners’ needs, of changing them according to the target situation.

Materials evaluation is not an easy process, nor is it short or quick. It comprises four major steps: gathering, analysing, comparing and deciding. The ESP teacher has to gather materials that could match the target needs, to analyse and compare them, and finally to decide which of them meets the target learners’ requirements. The second step – analysing – seems to be the most complex one in a process of evaluation, since it helps the teacher see which are the advantages / disadvantages of the materials he/she has gathered. Hutchinson and Waters [3, p. 99-104] suggest a checklist of criteria that could help a course designer analyse the evaluated materials. These relate to:

- intended *audience*
- *aims* of the materials
- *content*, in terms of linguistic description, language points covered, proportion of work on each skill, text-types included, subject-matter areas, assumed level of knowledge and types of topics
- *methodology*, in terms of underlying teaching theories, types of exercises/tasks included, teaching/learning techniques that can be used, flexibility, guidance provided
- other criteria, e.g. price.

The *evaluation process* “should be systematic and is best seen as a matching exercise: matching your

analysed needs with available solutions” [3, p.105]. After having answered all questions involved in the evaluation process, the teacher decides if the material suits his/her students’ needs, if he/she may use it as it is or if he/she has to adapt it to his/her students’ requirements, so as to meet the general and specific objectives of the course.

I shall exemplify this evaluation process by analysing a material that could be a good choice for students in Tourism: *English for International Tourism*. It is a material that comprises a course book [4], a workbook [5], a teacher’s resource book and three cassettes. As the title itself suggests, this material is intended for professionals working in the tourism industry and for learners preparing for a career in international tourism. Being designed for upper-intermediate and advanced levels, the material aims at revising the grammatical structures that students are already familiar with, at practising and improving students’ *speaking, listening, reading* and *writing* skills, at introducing and practising new grammar points and specialist vocabulary. It includes a structural/functional approach to language description; it focuses on a certain area of vocabulary, namely specialist vocabulary necessary for somebody working in the tourism industry (*Types of*

Holiday, A Career in Tourism, Trends in Tourism, Travel Agents, Transport are just a few unit titles that clearly point to the lexical items presented). As for the teaching theory, the material focuses on a *communicative approach*, offering a range of exercises that promote communication: information gap, presentations, negotiations, discussions, simulations, and role plays.

Conclusion

These would be, shortly outlined, the main steps that a course designer or a teacher could follow when designing an ESP course for a particular group of current / would-be specialists. There are three main stages that should never be neglected when designing an ESP course: **setting the objectives** of the course on the basis of *target and learning needs analysis* (which involves analysing the target learners’ *necessities, lacks* and *wants*); choice of the appropriate **teaching theory**; and choice of the appropriate **materials** (which could be done through *evaluation, development* or *adaptation*). By following these steps, one has the chance of designing an ESP course that really meets the requirements of the target learners.

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