Research and Discussion Note

Language for business: effective needs assessment, syllabus design and materials preparation in a practical ESP case study

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Abstract

This paper presents an ESP case study which took place in a specialised business context involving senior German bankers. It reflects the all too common situation of many overworked EFL teachers who are underprepared for the ESP assignment they are asked to undertake, and is especially of value to newcomers to the field of ESP in terms of recommendations for both published and authentic materials, as well as suggestions for learner tasks. © 2000 The American University. Published by Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Immediate context of the course

The immediate socio-cultural context of the course involved three German officials at the German Central Bank (the Bundesbank) in Frankfurt, one man and two women in their early thirties. They were colleagues with roughly equal status in the bank, although each of them was involved in a different department and carried out different duties. One woman analysed economic data and compiled statistics. The other woman worked as an adviser in a special financial department, and the man was primarily involved in meeting and negotiating with foreign banking officials. They had studied English at the university level, and had an impressive vocabulary and store of idioms, although these were not always used appropriately or in a native-like way.

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The class took place twice a week in the morning at 10:00 h and lasted for two 45 min periods in a large meeting room at the bank. Initially, the course was to last for three months but this was eventually extended to more than a year. Only rarely were all three students able to attend the class at the same time due to their extremely busy schedules. This made it possible to give special individual attention, attention demanded by high level managers in any ESP context, to one student when his or her colleagues were absent.

2. Details of course aims and objectives based on needs analysis

Full details of the internal “language audit” carried out by the bank’s own language department were not made available despite my initial request. No reason for this was given and I chose not to press the matter. Therefore, the initial course aims and objectives were determined by a personal interview which my schools director had with the employer, and by the brief needs analysis which I conducted on the first day of the course. This rudimentary needs analysis consisted of a list of general questions for the students about their past learning experience and future objectives.

Based on the advice of the school director and my own needs analysis, I decided to make one important aim of the course the improvement of the student’s spoken English used in business meetings and negotiations. The second important aim would be to include work on giving presentations using different kinds of graphs and charts. The course would also work on improving the skills of writing reports, reading short articles related to banking, and listening to language used by native speakers in meetings and “small talk”. The final aim of the course was to continue to build both general and specialist vocabulary. The most important overall objective of the course was to improve the speaking-confidence of the students, especially that of the women, when functioning in a native-speaker environment.

The combination of the employer interview, and the basic needs analysis questions which I posed to the students seemed to be an adequate basis for planning the course which satisfied all of the participants involved in the process, including the students. Experience teaching at dozens of multinational companies has shown me that student input is crucial to the successful design of an ESP course in any context.

The course aims and objectives seemed highly appropriate since they had a high degree of “face validity” for both the students and employer. They also provided a “high surrender value”, meaning that the students would be able to immediately use what they had learned to perform their jobs more effectively.

In accordance with the standard policy of my school I discussed these aims and objectives with the students and sought their approval and agreement. I later typed these aims in a non-binding “teacher–learner contract”, which I and my students signed before making one copy for each student and retaining the
original for my own records. During the course the students were asked for their valuable feedback and opinions on the exercises used, as well as about the general direction of the course.

3. Description of the course syllabus, materials and teaching methodology

I designed a multi-layered syllabus which consisted of the three complementary, closely interwoven strands of functions, topics, and vocabulary. Based on my experience teaching similar ESP courses I realised that the syllabus had to remain flexible. It could be supplemented by a variety of existing authentic material and relevant topic based activities such as role plays. The Language of Meetings (Goodale, 1987), International Business English (Jones & Alexander, 1989), and Build Your Business Vocabulary (Flower, 1990) formed a framework for the course, representing respectively the complementary strands of functions, topics, and vocabulary. Teaching nearly 40 contact hours a week, including weekends, I found that selectively exploiting and supplementing ready-made materials saved valuable time while providing the students with the language skills they required.

I chose to give some deductive presentations, a method already familiar to the students, to briefly review some grammatical structures. However, the overall approach to the course which I adopted was essentially “top-down” in nature. It focussed more on meaning than on form, on communicating and articulating ideas in meaningful contexts and drawing on background knowledge or content schemata, rather than simply decoding decontextualized basic, individual grammatical units at the sentence level.

Communicative information-gap and opinion-gap exercises in which the students had to pool information in order to complete financial statements and reports were employed. Jumbled texts were used to show the paragraph structure of various reports and business letters. Jumbled sentences were used to help students become familiar with the discourse patterns of language used to conduct business meetings, to negotiate and to engage in “small talk”. Charts, graphs, tables and summaries of statistics and trends in financial reports were used to practise scanning for information. Short articles dealing with economics or banking were selected from various magazines such as The Economist and used in a text presentation in which the students had to identify the functions of different cohesive devices or discourse markers with minimal guidance on my part. These articles and reports were used to practise skimming for information and to read carefully for detailed comprehension.

The students were often required to guess the meaning of new vocabulary based on the context, clues in the surrounding text, or on cognate roots. Their ability to deduce the meaning of new vocabulary and expressions improved as the course progressed. They steadily gained confidence and became more familiar with the structure and content of different text genres.
Cloze tests for vocabulary were employed that were based on one page articles on current topics of interest to my students, such as computer security. Discussions based on the topics presented in these articles or listed in *International Business English* frequently took place, and were often initiated spontaneously by the students themselves. A variety of vocabulary exercises based mainly on the exercises in *Build Your Business Vocabulary* were used. These exercises included matching words and phrases with pictures, finding opposites and synonyms, crossword puzzles, supplying the words in blank speech bubbles in satirical cartoons from the English language press, ranking groups of words according to different criteria, and sentence completion exercises.

The students were asked to record new vocabulary along with example sentences to aid them in remembering the new words. Short vocabulary quizzes were held orally near the beginning of each class in order to recycle previously learnt vocabulary and key words from past articles and discussions.

Strict error correction was virtually demanded by the students although this would have hindered the effectiveness of fluency practice. As a compromise solution, I took careful notes of many of the errors which occurred during class discussion. I either summarized these errors at the end of the lesson or presented them to the students for self-correction or peer correction, although I eventually chose not to use peer correction techniques since this led to open conflict between the students, who were all highly competitive in nature, and to whom any loss of face in front of their colleagues was deeply resented. Peer correction is always a sensitive issue in any ESP context. Some class discussions and role plays simulating a meeting or negotiation were tape-recorded. The students were then asked to evaluate their own performance.

Despite their busy schedule, the students made it explicit that they expected to be given a large amount of homework in the form of articles and writing assignments. However, homework was rarely completed or done at all. As a result, I was always prepared to work the exercises assigned for homework into the following class. This is a clear pattern which emerges in similar ESP courses, in which the professionals involved equate the value and standard of the course with the amount of homework that it generates. In many cases, the students use homework assignments, completed or not, as apparent physical evidence of hard work to impress their colleagues or superiors in their company.

In addition to the material used in the three core textbooks mentioned, various authentic materials were exploited to make the course more interesting and relevant. Articles were regularly selected from newspapers such as *The Guardian*, *The Times*, and *The New York Times*. Articles on general financial and banking matters of current interest were also taken from international magazines such as *The Economist* and *Time*. A bilingual magazine called ‘*Spotlight*’, with useful footnotes on key vocabulary items and authentic interview transcripts, was also used. Such transcripts form an excellent basis for role plays, and always seem to be popular with ESP students. Tape-recordings from recent short-wave broadcasts of the B.B.C. ‘World Business Report’ were used in cloze tests. The use of
authentic, current material is clearly appreciated by ESP students and is an important motivating factor in their learning.

The students themselves and their vast accumulated store of subject matter knowledge constituted the most valuable source of course material. Explaining certain concepts and complicated issues to me in English, prompted by intelligent questions on my part, challenged them and helped them to become more efficient and articulate speakers of English.

A video recorder would have been useful to record actual bank meetings and the authentic language generated by them. However, it was simply not possible in this particular course to gain access as an outside observer to actual bank meetings conducted in English between my students and foreign officials. Careful observation of the target language situation is far superior to the imagination of the teacher or materials writer (Williams, 1998). I was simply not allowed to observe the students working at the bank. However, the students gave me positive feedback on some of the fixed expressions which they had learned to use in specific meeting or negotiating situations (Henry, 1996).

I should have suggested to the language department at the bank the possibility of creating concordances of the vocabulary stored on the bank’s data base (Stevens, 1991). Vocabulary searches could have been conducted by authorized personnel to protect the secrecy of the documents stored on the data base. I was also unable to record any of the students English telephone conversations or to obtain copies of authentic internal memos, faxes, business letters or E-mail messages used at the Bundesbank. All of this potentially useful internal authentic material was closed to me for reasons of tight security and secrecy at the Bundesbank.

4. Course evaluation

The course was extended to more than a year after an initial 3-month period. It had been evaluated according to four of the five criteria listed in Hutchinson and Waters (1987). Test results, discussions, interviews and informal means had been used to assess the course. Frequent informal testing in the form of role plays, presentations, and discussions in class all demonstrated improvement in fluency and speaking confidence.

I was interviewed at the end of the first 3-month period by educational experts in the bank’s own language department. They seemed satisfied with my ESP course design and teaching. The course was then extended indefinitely.

ESP is not a completely different variety of English and so not all of the language practised was narrowly restricted to the precise context of the target language situation (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). Since the preferred teaching-learning processes and learning styles of individual students may vary considerably, some deductive presentations were also introduced (Ellis, 1994). The important ESP issue of “contractual accountability” was covered in the agreement
on the course description which I and the students signed (Weir & Roberts, 1994). The necessities, lacks, wants, and learning needs of the students were all considered and addressed in the course.

A video recorder would also have been useful to record student role plays, presentations and discussions in the classroom for use in self-evaluation procedures (Nolasco & Arthur, 1987). This teaching aid was not made available for reasons of cost.

Severe time constraints and lack of access to authentic data from inside the bank itself made following overly complex, time consuming, and explicit directives such as those in John Munby’s landmark, though now somewhat dated, “Communicative Needs Processor” (Munby, 1978) highly impractical.

The materials used in the course were subjected to a mental checklist based on my own practical experiential ESP background knowledge, and general English teacher training. This list covered the categories of “audience”, “aims”, “content”, “methodology” and “other criteria” (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).

In conclusion, an effective and flexible ESP course design can be derived from the teachers own practical experiential knowledge and from the students themselves. This may be more effective than following explicit directives as to how to do a needs analysis and build ESP curricula. Current authentic texts in the media, and widely available international textbooks published for such fields as the general “business English” market can be used selectively and efficiently adapted to the specific needs of particular students in an ESP context.

References