A Study of an ESP Curriculum for Airline Agents in China

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Abstract

English for specific purpose (ESP) has for about 30 years been a separate branch of English language Teaching (ELT). Recent years in China, with the development of international trade and foreign exchange, more and more in-service and pre-service staffs are expected to learn practical al and useful English language in order to adapt to the new situation. A course design in this case is initiated for a group of service agents from the airline. The aim of this course is to help the airline agents, whose services will inevitably involve communications with foreign guests in English, develop their language skills in air transport profession.

Keywords: ESP, Course Design, Airline Agents

1. Introduction

English for specific purpose (ESP) has for about 30 years been a separate branch of English language Teaching (ELT). ESP is an umbrella term embracing a number of sub-divisions and is often divided up into two main sub-branches: English for Academic Purposes (EAP), dealing with the use of English in study settings where the main goal of language learning is the ability to cope in the student's chosen academic specialism; and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP), where the language is needed in the workplace environment of a job or profession. (Johnson & Johnson, 1998, p.106) Another perspective is of English for Science and Technology, English for Business and Economics and English for Social Science, each with an EAP and EOP division. (St John, 1996, p.3) English for Business Purpose (EBP) is currently the area of greatest activity and growth in ESP. (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998, p.53)

This English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course is designed for a group of service agents from the airline. As the domains of air transport are mediated through the use of English as an auxiliary language, English proficiency becomes a necessity to airline personnel since nowadays more and more foreign guests visit China by air for traveling and business purposes. The aim of this course is to help the airline agents, whose services will inevitably involve communications with foreign guests in English, develop their language skills in air transport profession.

China Eastern Airline has long been engaged in personnel in-service training programs. According to a joint contract with Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics, the airline began to send groups of its personnel to Nanjing for their English training in summer, 2007. There will be 24 learners from the airline coming this summer. All the learners are expected to study in Nanjing for one month and all their accommodation and tuition fees are all sponsored by the airline. Therefore, a study of the course design is preferred in this case.

2. Literature review of ESP Curriculum

There is no set definition for EBP in fact. Pickett highlights the fact that there is more than one face to business communication with some of it being 'a lot nearer the everyday language spoken by the general public than many other segments of ESP. (1986, p.16, cited in Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998, p.54)

Business English courses require 'the careful research and design of pedagogical materials and activities for an identifiable group of adult learners within a specific learning context' (Johns & Dudley-Evans 1991, cited in St John, 1996, p.3-4)

2.1 Causes of the EBP growth

Swales concludes the causes of this growth as follows:

2.1.1 Historical reasons

This area has been historically poorly researched in comparison to science and technology. (2000, p.5) St John agrees with this by saying 'there is little published research into what constitutes Business English'. (1996, p.3) According to Ellis and Johnson, they consider Business English is an area often neglected by linguistic researchers, who prefer to work on other more easily defined areas of special English. (1994, p.3)

2.1.2 The impact of Internationalization and Globalization

Internationalization and the new globalization have drawn many more business people into bilingual and multilingual occupational settings. (2000, p.5)The new business climate has made it more and more obvious that traditional business language teaching materials are becoming increasingly obsolete in today's multimedia business world. (ibid. p.5)

2.1.3 The Recognition of international marketplace

The emerging recognition of an international marketplace has done something to bring together the strengths of North America business communications research tradition and the investigation of language for business. (ibid. p.5)

2.2 Who needs Business English?

English has become an international language or lingua franca in business communities (Crystal, 1997, p.10) English is no longer the language of England and America, and a classroom which focuses on using English in international contexts needs to reflect this change. (Paltridge, 1991, p.32) Most English-medium communications in business are non-native speaker to non-native speakers. (NNS-NNS) (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998, p.53) One of the consequences of the role of English as the international language is that NNSs may understand each other more easily than the native speaker (NS) understands them. People who share a first language (L1) may share a common use of English which is not the NS use. (ibid. p.54)

Besides, Ellis and Johnson classify learners of business English into three categories according to their different roles: pre-experience learners, low-experience learners and job-experienced learners. (1994, p.15-7)

2.3 Classifications of EBP

Business English itself has become an umbrella term encompassing what we call English for General Business Purposes (EGBP) and English for Specific Business Purposes (ESBP). (St John, 1996, p.3)

Many learners attend EGBP courses at a language school and groups will usually be formed on the basis of language level rather than job. Most units of the course books contain work on the traditional four skills plus specific grammar and vocabulary development. (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998, p.55) Dudley-Evans & St John introduce the courses as follows: the construct of the course is often grammatical; the courses are designed to cover the grammar of English systematically; published course books designed for use on the extensive courses; focuses on presentation through listening and/or reading, followed by exercises to practice grammar and vocabulary; teaching focuses on accuracy and correct answers; activities are more open-ended and develop fluency in one or more of the four skills and teach a broad range of English through business settings rather than English for specific business purposes. (ibid. p.55-6)

On the other hand, ESBP courses are run for job-experienced learners who bring business knowledge and skills to the language-learning situation. (ibid. p.56) The features of these courses can be concluded as follows: carefully tailored; focus on one or two language skills and specific business communicative events; materials include published books, framework materials and specially written activities; usually intensive courses; a more deep-end approach is followed, starting from a fluency activity, progressing to language and skills work based on outcome, and leading to further fluency practice and setting and carrier content mainly taken from learners' own business contexts.(ibid. p.56)

2.4 Similarities and differences to other forms of ESP

Business English must be seen in the overall context of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), as it shares the important and similar elements of need analysis, syllabus design, and materials selection and development which are common to all fields of work in ESP. (Ellis & Johnson, 1994, p.3) Business English, as a major sub-branch of ESP, is endowed with the following absolute characteristics: First, it is designed to meet specific needs of the learners. Second, it makes uses of the underlying methodologies and activities of the disciplines it serves. Finally, it is centered on the language (grammar, lexis, and register), skills, discourse and genres appropriate to these activities. (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998, p.4-5)

As with other varieties of ESP, Ellis and Johnson suggest that Business English implies the definition of a specific language corpus and emphasis on particular kinds of communication in a specific context. They believe Business English differs from other varieties of ESP in that it is often a mix of specific content (relating to a particular job area or industry), and general content (relating to general ability to communicate more effectively, albeit in business situations.) (1994, p.3)

2.5 EBP versus EAP

While the principles and approaches of ESP are as relevant to EBP/BE as EAP, there are some remarkable differences between the two fields as follows:

Firstly, in EAP some inkling of the reception-history of a particular text can be obtained by seeing where it was published and how it was cited. In the business world, such traces are rare. (Swales, 2000, p.5)

Secondly, EAP operates within a world where the fundamental concern is the acquisition of knowledge by individuals, while in EBP the purpose is not centered on the learner as an individual but as a member of a transactional world where the fundamental concern is the exchange of goods and services. (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998, p.72)

Thirdly, in most EAP situations there is an interaction between native and non-native speaker. There is an inbuilt balance between the interactants at the level of English language competence. In addition, there is a further imbalance of power and authority, since the NNS often has a dependency on the NS's academic position and role. In EBP, most interactions are between non-native speakers and the balance of power depends on their business relationship. So it is impossible to predict on the basis of language where power lies. (ibid. p.72)

Fourthly, in English L1 situations, the NNS generally has to adapt to both language and culture. In EBP situations, the NNS may use English as an international language or lingua franca but not adapt to the culture. (ibid. p.72-3)

Lastly, EBP teachers do not generally have any direct experience of their learners' context whereas all EAP teachers have studied in an academic environment. (ibid. p.73)

2.6 Characteristics of EBP language

Comparatively, the language of Business English as a special area of ESP has its unique features as follows:

2.6.1 Sense of purpose

A sense of purpose can be regarded as the most important characteristic of exchanges in the context of business meetings, telephone calls and discussions. (Ellis & Johnson, 1994, p.7) All the settings in EBP reflect strong business purposes in this sense. The Language is used to achieve an end or a result, and its successful use is seen in terms of a successful outcome to the business transaction or event. (ibid. p.7) In this sense, users of Business English, in order to achieve more in their jobs, need to speak English. World business is very competitive: competition exists between companies and also within companies, between employees striving to better their careers. (Ellis & Johnson, 1994, p.7) So it follows that performance objectives take priority over educational objectives or language learning for its own sake. (ibid.p.7)

2.6.2 Social aspects

In the special contexts of international business, there should be some courtesy to be maintained. Social contacts are often highly ritualized since there is a need for an internationally accepted way of doing things so that people from different cultures and with different mother tongues can quickly feel more comfortable with one another. (ibid. p.8) Basically, formulaic language is used in the context of a routine pattern of exchanges. The style of the language is polite but also short and direct and both the style and content of social interactions will be typified by a desire to build a good business relationship while avoiding over-familiarity. (ibid. p.8)

2.6.3 Clear communication

In business contexts, the language should be both clear in meaning and concise in delivery. Information has to be conveyed with minimum risk of misunderstanding and the time for processing needs to be short. Therefore, there is a preference for clear, logical, thought emphasized by the kinds of words that indicate the logical process. (ibid. p. 9) For example, a point that is ambiguous in a business letter will cause trouble to both sides, and further exchange of letters for explanation will become inevitable, thus time will be lost. (Gan, 1996, p.1)

There is also a need to be concise, especially when communicating by fax or telephone and certain familiar concepts may be expressed in word clusters to avoid circumlocution. (Ellis & Johnson, 1994, p. 10) Therefore, clearness and conciseness in Business English often 'go hand-in-hand and the elimination of wordy jargon can help to make a business context or a business letter clearer and at the same time more concise.' (Gan, 1996, p.1)

EBP is currently the area of greatest activity and growth in the domain of ESP. I have reviewed some fundamental concepts of EBP, distinguished it from other forms of ESP and discussed some key issues of EBP. Like many other forms of ESP, Business English would be of great benefit to ELT teachers' research and practice.

3. Course design for Airline Agents

3.1 Course profile

3.1.1 Type of the course

As a typical English course for occupational purposes (EOP), this course is scheduled to be conducted as an intensive course in which learners' time will be committed for four hours a day, 8 am to 12 am, for 4 weeks. This course is an in-service program and will be run as a parallel with experience course, since all of the learners have worked in the airline for one to three years and have gained considerable working experience in their target jobs. The needs in this course fall into the immediate needs in that all the learners expect this course could be applicable and meet the English requirements in their profession. Thus, learners often seem to be much more motivated by the course that would prepare

them in their present jobs.

3.1.2 Course focus

This course is intended for a broad focus: learners will not only be involved in all four basic skills, but also concentrate on a range of target events, such as professional skills and career content. The topics covered in the course will reflect the specific needs of learners. English will be employed as the medium of instruction and as a classroom language. Learners are encouraged to speak English in their daily life during the course period so as to promote the learners' communicative skills and create an English speaking environment.

3.2 Overview of the course

Course length: Total 80 hours (20 four-hour sessions)

          5 days per week

Size of group: 24 participants

Occupation: Air transport personnel in China Eastern Airline

Age: 20-25 years olds.

Participants: Learners have obtained a degree or certificate and worked in the airline for at least 1 year and have an upper-intermediate level of English proficiency.

Location: Nanjing in Jiangsu Province, China

Overall aims of the course: At the end of this course, learners are expected to demonstrate:

The ability to participate effectively in air transport business through the accomplishment of job specific tasks via communicative activities; the ability to overcome language barriers and improve customer service through the specific techniques; and the ability to read air transport materials related to different genres in English through understanding reading strategies.

3.3 Content of the course

This course is comprehensive in that the content covers the basic language skills in speaking, listening and reading and also involves air transport practice. In this sense, materials selected should be used as a source of language, a learning support, for motivation and stimulation or for reference.(Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998, p.170-171)

The major criteria for selecting materials are whether the materials are useful and stimulating to the learners, to what extent the materials match the stated learning objectives, (whether the carrier content can match the real content) and to what extent the materials support the learning. (ibid. p. 173) Since the practice in air transport involves professional knowledge and language skills, instructional materials to be used in this course are mainly focused on air transport English course books and civil aviation readings, together with teacher-generated in-house materials.

Set course books are:

Weston, D. (1993). *Civil Aviation English Course*. Tianjin: China Civil Aviation Press.

Zhu, P. (2000). *An English course of air transport.* Tianjin: China Civil Aviation Press.

Zhou, S. T. (1996). *Dialogues in customer service.* Tianjin: China Civil Aviation Press.

The in-house materials representing language input are collected from a range of sources which mainly encourage learners' motivation in learning and are related to their jobs or profession. Most of the materials are authentic or real-life based in order to stimulate learners' interests. The learning process consists of task-based learner-centered activities. So all the tasks devised seek to enable the learners to recognize their progress and weakness in language learning. When in class and outside the class, they are given the opportunities to use English more smoothly and fluently during the course.

For the sake of learners' engagement, materials of models, pictures and handouts include interesting and comprehensible examples from a variety of related sources which are suitable to the target needs. For instance, a globe will be advisable when teaching identifying world time zones, a model of aircraft when teaching flight seat assignment. A good teaching establishment must have a resource unit to support the teacher of this course and provide these materials.

Similarly, teaching of English speaking employs a number of audio-visual materials such as cassettes, videos, VCDs, DVDs, CD-ROMs and other forms of multimedia materials. To help improve learners' listening and speaking, all the in-house reading materials are equipped with cassette tapes.

3.4 Needs analysis

Needs analysis refers to the process of determining the needs for which a learner or group of learners requires a

language and arranging the needs according to priorities. (Richards et al., 1992, p.304) Needs analysis is regarded as an essential procedure in the process of ESP courses and at the same time is a necessity in learner-centered approach.

In this ESP course, needs analysis is of importance to organization of teaching in that the learners' necessities, wants, lacks and constraints as put forward by Hutchinson and Waters (1987) are specific and may be quite distinct from those of university students.

Objective needs analysis results in content specifications derived from an analysis if the target communicative situations in which learners are likely to find themselves. (Nunan, 1988, p.44) So the learners' objective needs have been revealed from the content of the course.

To achieve more information of target situation analysis (TSA), first, structured interviews with airline administrators have been used before the course. Trainer gets information about their target needs and learner performance expectations. Second, since the trainers may not be familiar with the real aspects of air transport practice in addition to the book-based content, trainers have observed at the airport the daily functions of air transport service and developed many authentic reports.

As for the present situation analysis (PSA), first, since similar courses have run for several times before, it is a good way for the trainers to discuss with previous course teachers to identify problems in the past courses. Second, a placement English assessment is scheduled to get information of learners' present situation analysis. The language assessment includes listening, speaking and reading sections. This assessment will provide the trainers with the participants' present language ability, and also diagnose their major language needs. Finally, questionnaires will be handed out to collect participants' motivations and interests in learning and their previous learning experiences.

Besides, since the group size is not big, the information will be collected through in-depth exploration and through face-to-face interviews with the participants. Only in this way, learners' subjective needs, especially their needs of the outcomes of the course could be found out. This type of interviews is scheduled to be conducted at both the beginning and middle of the course.

3.5 Evaluation and assessment

3.5.1 Learner assessment

The reason for assessment lies in acquiring feedback to aid learning or achieving a comparable measure of competence. (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998, p. 210) In many cases, although, tests may be inappropriate on a short intensive ESP course, (ibid. p.210) this course, out of the two concerns, requires immediate, tangible evidence of course outcomes and improvements. Besides, as manipulated, (Weston, 1993, p.3) these airline agents have to sit for an English proficiency test after learning which is examined by an examination board in NUAA under the supervision of China Civil Aviation Bureau.

3.5.2 Course evaluation

Since the ESP course exists to satisfy a particular education need, a course evaluation helps to show how well the course is actually fulfilling the need. (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p. 152) In this course, the following techniques may be used to evaluate: (1) Test results, (2) Questionnaires and (3) Interviews.

The outcomes of the evaluation will indicate from all aspects how well this course prepares the learners to be confidently and competently perform in their target situations.

4. Conclusion

ESP courses in China have recently been popular with the development of Chinese Economy and society, since China's Entry into the WTO. More and more staffs require practical and purposeful training in English for their employment and service. So it is urgent that tentative ESP courses should be designed to satisfy their needs.

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Table 1. Outline of the course

Day	Topic	Hour
1	Airline services introduction	4
2	Readings of airline services	4
3	Reading The Regulation of international airline services	4
4	Customer services: Handling Telephone reservations	4
5	Workshop: handling telephone reservations	4
6	Handling information enquiry	4
7	Tickets and fares	4
8	Passenger services at the airport	4
9,10	Tutorial group discussion :Offering Passenger services	8
11	Providing Baggage service	4
12	Workshop: solving baggage service problems	4
13	Services for departing and arriving passengers	4
14	Tutorial: factors affecting passenger demand	4
15	Reading: problems in airline scheduling	4
16	Handling Passenger enquiry at the airport	4
17	Reading: of Air freight	4
18	Reading: developments of air freight services	4
19	Workshop: airline pricing policy	4
20	End-of-course assessment	4

Table 2. Course framework

Target Events	Rhetorical Awareness and skill areas	Language Usage		Functions	Materials	Topics
		Grammar	Vocabulary			
Presenting effective communication	Dialogues in customer service	Numerals, tense	Choice of lexis, Technical words	Inquiry, Offering, request and reply	Course book and in-house	Telephone inquiry; Information enquiry;
	Using appropriate speaking	Modals, Imperative sentences	Verbs: request, suggest,	Time, space,		
Providing Customer services	Handling air transport practice	Imperative sentence, Simple and complex clauses,	Nouns: Technical terms Verbs: suggest, remind, permit,	Suggestion, Prediction, reminding, Promise, Calculation, Measurement, Quality	Course book and in-house	Telephone reservation, Ticketing and fares, Lost and found service, Baggage service, departing and arriving, pricing
	Solving possible problems	Imperative sentence, sequence markers	Explain, demonstrate	Agree, disagree, Permission, negation, interpret		
Reading materials of air transport	Understanding and utilizing materials and documents of air transport in different genres		Nouns: Technical words, air transport abbreviation	Quality, shape, color, size, material, tables, tags	In-house authentic	Regulation and policy, flight schedules, air freight