



IJMRD 2015; 2(1): 242-246
www.allsubjectjournal.com
Received: 15-12-2014
Accepted: 10-01-2015
e-ISSN: 2349-4182
p-ISSN: 2349-5979
Impact factor: 3.762

Tonia Grace Ganta
Research Scholar, Department of
Education, Andhra University,
Visakhapatnam- 530003,
Andhra Pradesh, India.

Language curriculum design & evaluation – the elements for designing english for specific purposes (ESP) courses.

Tonia Grace Ganta

Abstract

With the demand for learning real world English language based on context and the role of the people involved, the craze for learning English is on a raise and there is mushrooming of a number of Spoken English institutes in every nook and corner of the country. But the courses designed in these institutes do not cater to the needs of the learner. It is observed that earlier ESP courses emphasised on reading and writing skills, but now equal attention is paid to all four language skills. It is also noted that in recent times general English content like grammar appears to be common in ESP courses and at the same time lot of attention is paid to communicative skills like making presentations, taking part in meetings, negotiation, group discussions, professional socializing etc. This paper attempts to summarise the basic elements for designing ESP courses.

Keywords: Language Curriculum, Design, English for Specific purposes (ESP)

1. Background context

English has been there in India for more than two hundred years. The charter of 1813 promoted teaching of English in India. During the British rule English became the language of Government and also education. English medium schools were established. But the position of English in India is no more the same. The English atmosphere in schools faded after the attainment of independence, as many of the politicians wanted to condemn English in order to uplift regional languages in the country. The situation has changed again as a consequence of globalisation and the establishment of multi-national companies in the country. Though there are a lot of English medium schools and also the regional medium schools offer English as a compulsory subject, the teachers are not well qualified most of the time, so the standard of English of the students is not up to the mark. Most of the multi-national companies in India, especially the ones dealing with business process outsourcing select local candidates with reasonably good English and then train them in order to improve their language proficiency. As unemployment is predominant in the country, multi-national companies try to make the most of the human resource that is available for low pay though the candidates are not very proficient, the companies recruit them and then train them to meet their requirements. Thus the candidates are obliged to enrol in an ESP course before or after their recruitment.

2. Introduction

There is a thin line between the course content of ESP and EGP (English for General purposes). When the proficiency level of the learner is quite low the chosen course content mostly consists of general English which aims to prepare the learner to face survival situations. Based on availability of time, content from EGP is also used in order to improve fluency and create variety in class (Tomlinson, 2009). Appropriate content for ESP does not consist of information about language, but it functions as a carrier of language by making language use meaningful and improving language acquisition and task performance (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998, Johns, 1997, Carson, Taylor & Fredella, 1997 as cited in Belcher, 2006).

3. Designing ESP courses

A language course has to be designed in such a way that it covers language items, skills and strategies as suggested by experts (Nation and Macalister, 2010).

Correspondence:
Tonia Grace Ganta
Research Scholar,
Department of Education,
Andhra University,
Visakhapatnam- 530003,
Andhra Pradesh, India.

The cognitive as well as the linguistic abilities of the students and also the teachers are considered as a part of needs assessment and the needs identified are to be arranged according to the priorities (Brown, 1995). While prioritising the needs can be categorised into necessities, lacks and wants of the learners and they can be identified by testing, questioning, interviewing, recalling previous performance, consulting employers, teachers and others involved like team leaders, and also by investigating the situations where the learners will need to use the language (Nation & Macalister, 2010). Most of these principles are taken into consideration while conducting needs analysis prior to developing an ESP course.

3.1 Environment analysis and needs analysis

Before designing a language course, one needs to know which related skills the learner needs and based on that the instructional goals should be set, so that the curriculum best suits the learner needs. It is noted that the need of companies for foreign languages has varied aspects like phonological/orthographical, lexical, grammatical, pragmatic and cultural (Vandermeeren as cited in Long, 2005). All the above stated aspects should be kept in mind while conducting the needs analysis. Environment analysis is as important as needs analysis and is said to make sure that the course will actually be suitable, practical and realistic (Nation & Macalister, 2010).

The needs analysis and the environment analysis for a particular course can be carried out by interviewing the key person. The Key person/manager is asked questions about the kind of job the learners are going to perform, their main duties, the kind of people they are going to interact with. Information regarding the classroom environment the number of learners is also collected. The learners are also interviewed in order to assess their language proficiency level, to find out what they can do, need to do in order to perform their job and what they want to do, so that the gap can be bridged by means of the course. The instructors will be a part of the interview panel, so that they get a picture of the level of English language proficiency of the candidates. This helps the instructors to cater to the language needs of the learners in a better way. And it also saves the time of the learners as well as the instructors, as it helps the instructors to know the ability of learners before actually starting the course. Especially in the case of a short duration course lasting only for two weeks and ten working days, it prevents the instructors from wasting time in assessing the learners after resuming the course.

The following needs are to be identified after conducting the needs analysis

a) Situational needs

Customer service executives come across various situations. The situational needs focus on imparting training to make a presentation, conducting a series of negotiations, using the telephone, emailing in English, participating more actively in meetings. The situational needs therefore aim at training the learners to meet the above stated needs.

b) Lexical needs

There is a need to develop the learners' specific terminology relating to their area of business. There are several word lists available online too, which are itemized and specific to various business processes and business related skills the learners are involved with.

c) Skill based needs

The course needs to focus on developing key communication skills namely speaking, listening, reading, writing and pronunciation to achieve greater authenticity in their use of English language.

“Needs assessment is seen in ESP as the foundation on which all other decisions are, or should be made” (Belcher, 2006). Needs analysis is an important principle in planning an ESP course instead of developing a course based on language analysis the ESP approach starts with the learners' needs. In ESP learners' needs are based on what the learner will do with the language at the end of the course, the language function involved and situations in which the learner is going to work. Needs analysis in language teaching is useful in a number of different ways. It is used to find out the language skills the learner requires in order to perform a specific role, to identify the gap between what the learners are able to do and what they should be able to do and also to collect information about the problem experienced by learners. It is easier to determine the language needs of learners if the language course is meant for specific purposes. “Needs analysis includes the study of perceived and present needs as well as potential and unrecognized needs” (Richards, 2009 pg 53). Needs are conceptualized by differentiating objective needs and subjective needs. Objective needs are said to be “derived from the factual information about the learners, their use of language in real life communication situations as well as their current language proficiency and language difficulties”. Subjective needs are “the cognitive and affective needs of the learner in the learning situation, derivable from information about affective and cognitive factors such as personality, confidence, attitudes, learners' wants and expectations with regard to the learning of English and their individual cognitive style and learning strategies” (Brindley, 1989 as cited in Graves, 1996). Needs analysis can be conducted in three stages based on one's context. 1) the planning stage 2) the teaching stage 3) the re-planning stage. The selection, ordering, presentation, and assessment of the material in a language course are to be based on a careful consideration of the learners and their needs, the teaching conditions, and the time and resources available. Especially if it is an in service course where the amount of time available for the course is very limited, needs analysis and environment analysis play a vital role in the success of the course.

3.2. Course goals and objectives

The goal of an ESP course is to meet the specific language needs of the learners and to build confidence in dealing with diverse situations in inland as well as overseas business. The objective of an ESP course is to develop the essential

business skills such as presenting, reporting, negotiating conducting meetings and socialising in English.

A whole lot of information is generated by needs analysis and that is utilized for the formulation of goals and objectives of the language program (Brown, 1995). Course goals and objectives should be realistic, achievable and measurable. It is argued that language courses should be designed in such a way that the attainment goals match with the language learning needs of specific groups of learners (Branden, 2006). It is suggested that the goals of English for Academic purposes (EAP) and English for occupational purposes (EOP) are not easily separable. For instance Business English is considered EOP and there is something called English for academic business purposes EABP which is considered as EAP (Belcher, 2006). English for international business (EIB) has an essential function as a lingua franca in multilingual settings; it can present challenges both linguistically and culturally.

It is suggested that there are four types of goals for language learners namely proficiency goals, cognitive goals, affective goals, and transfer goals. Proficiency goals consist of general competency, mastery of the four language skills i.e. speaking, listening, reading, and writing and the mastery of specific language behaviours. Cognitive goals comprise of mastery of linguistic and cultural knowledge. Affective goals deal with achieving positive attitude and feelings about the target language and also gaining confidence as a user of the language. Transfer goals are about learning how to learn in order to meet future learning challenges (Stern, 1992 as cited in Graves, 1996). It is pointed out that objectives are a particular way of formulating or stating content and activities. So how the objectives are stated depends on how one conceptualizes the content of the course (Nunan, 1988 as cited in Graves, 1996). It is noted that there are five kinds of objectives which are interrelated. 1) coverage objectives 2) activity objectives 3) involvement objectives 4) mastery objectives 5) critical thinking objectives (Saphier & Gower, 1987 as cited in Graves, 1996). It might seem difficult to achieve all these goals and objectives satisfactorily within a short span so the learners can be encouraged to work mostly on their own, so that they continue to acquire all the skills even after completing the course.

3.3. Course content

Based on the 17th century Moravian educational reformer Comenius principle that Knowledge is attained in successive steps, simplicity, Sequencing or grouping, frequency, utility and teachability are used as the criteria for gradation in structural syllabus design (Johnson as cited in Knapp & Seidlhofer, 2009). This course is also designed based on the above criteria. The course content is fairly flexible but it mainly comprises of the following components.

a) Language based content

The language based course content consists of i) language items like grammatical structures, developing specific vocabulary and terminology, refining pronunciation etc. ii) Language skills like improving writing, speaking, reading comprehension and listening comprehension and fluency.

iii) Discourse skills like cohesion, coherence, register and text types.

b) Non-language based content

The non-language based content consists of imparting communication skills, working as a part of the group, improving confidence, problem solving, participating in meetings, telephone etiquette, ability to negotiate, computer training, business pragmatics, intercultural communication and business discourse.

Genres such as e-mail, advertisements, business letters, writing meeting notes and reports require proficiency in writing, but many students think that writing is not so important and they do not perceive how it relates to their degree or future career. Therefore, it is often difficult to motivate students in a writing class. (Campbell, 2002 as cited in Bacha & Bahous, 2008). It is said that "Business writing will continue to be valued by recruiters and hiring professionals, who believe a person's ability to write well can help him or her move up the corporate ladder". (Schott Karr, 2001 as cited in Bacha & Bahous, 2008, P. 76). Many studies suggest how ESP instructors can help students acquire the necessary writing skills and genres. Through collaborative writing, technical writing focusing on language, organisation and content (Barbour, 1990, Jameson, 2006 as cited in Bacha & Bahous 2008). Students can be motivated by giving them efficient feedback and grading. Samples of 'good' and 'bad' writing can be shown. Genre-based instruction and vocabulary prepares the learners for job market.

It is argued that technology facilitates ESP learners to take part in communicative activities unexpectedly. It gives the learners a chance to work on their own in their own pace and place. The cognitive skills of the learners are improved as they learn to work individually with the help of technology. There are a lot of ESP courses available online and the learners can make use of those courses. They get a chance to listen to the native English speakers which helps the learners to enhance their listening comprehension as well as fluency. A study on immigrant textile workers in Chicago showed that computer training acted as a motivator for language acquisition (Belcher, 2006). Therefore technology classes can also be included in the time table.

3.4. Teaching Methodology

A combination of communicative approach and structural approach would be suitable to teach an ESP course. To impart communication skills like telephoning, composing e-mails, other correspondence like letter writing, drafting simple contracts, report writing proposals, agreements, composing project outlines, note taking for meetings etc. structural approach can be used. To impart presentation skills like group work, oral presentations, planning and structuring a presentation, positioning the message, matching context to audience, involving the audience, presenting facts, figures, trends, taking questions, time management etc. and negotiation skills like problem solving functional approach can be used.

The task based class room activities can be based on the audio lingual method and the communicative language

teaching method. The audio-lingual method helps the learners listen and comprehend language used by native English speakers in meetings. Practice in usage of specific terminology can be given both orally and in the written form by engaging the learners in group work, pair work and also individual work. Learners can be given tasks to read reports, articles and magazines in order to improve their reading comprehension. Techniques like simulation, role play, imitation, repetition and oral presentation can be used.

3.5. Role of the instructors

The instructors of ESP courses need to be highly experienced and qualified teachers with a flair for creativity. They need to have a dynamic and well-rounded personality. They should be aware of the back ground knowledge and be in a position to motivate the learners and monitor the progress of learners. The learning strategies that can be used are reading for comprehension, revising and remembering vocabulary, working in pairs and groups and taking turns, sharing for speaking activities. The learners can also be encouraged to give constructive feedback to each other. The ESP trainers need to be experts in motivating and inspiring professional learners to achieve their goals as well as in the assessment of language learning capability. It is a challenge on the part of both the learners and the instructors, more challenging for the instructors than for the learners. The instructors need to be lively, enthusiastic and streamlined in order to make the most of the course.

It is observed that now-a-days ESP accepts many different approaches like other areas of English language teaching. A mix of different types of materials and methodologies are used. The greater the amount of specialisation of an ESP course, the greater is the demand for specialism and creativity of the teacher. At times the learners will be more aware of the topic area than the teacher. It is claimed that “there is no such thing as an ESP methodology, ESP is often seen as a material driven rather than methods-driven enterprise” (Hutchinson & Waters 1987 as cited in Belcher, 2006 p. 137). Methodological competence and awareness along with language competence or the teacher factors to be considered (Cunningsworth, 1995, as cited in Mc Grath, 2006).

“In order to improve individual performance, whether it is teaching or learning, we need a sense of ownership, and power, driven by an exploratory attitude and working within a curricular framework that is flexible and dynamic enough to allow for individual explorations” (Cotterall & Crabbe, 1999 as cited in Cotterall 2000). It is evident that no short term programme can meet all the language needs of the learner. So a course which aims at developing learner autonomy can meet this problem by teaching them strategies to enhance their self-learning, language acquiring strategies. There are a number of high quality ESP books available in the market catering to the specific, topical needs of the learners, the teacher can match and suggest specific books which can meet the specific needs and learning profiles of the individual learners and learner groups. There are books and web materials meant for different proficiency levels of the students like lower intermediate level, intermediate level

and upper intermediate level learners, they serve as course books, resource books and also self-study material.

3.6. Assessment

Assessment should be valid, reliable, practicable, objective, clear comprehensive graded and also interesting to the learners. Assessment can be conducted in three stages, Diagnostic, Formative and summative. Ongoing assessment should be conducted as and when the students complete the exercises and activities i.e. the learners progress should be assessed continuously on a day to day basis. Feedback must be given immediately in order to help the learners overcome their learning difficulties. Peer assessment can be used as a way to make them feel at ease. The performance of the learners can be checked in every session and remedial measures can be suggested immediately. The aspects of assessment include the listening comprehension of the learners, the reading comprehension, the ability to write e-mails, reports and letters, their speaking skills, the way they plan, organise and conduct a presentation. The negotiation skills of the learners can be checked by way of simulation. A real life context can be presented to the learner and the way they handle the situation can be checked. Assessment of all these skills can be carried out after the practice session on an everyday basis so that the learners are not stressed out towards the end of the course. The students can also be encouraged to monitor their own progress by way of self-evaluation along with the teacher assessment and the peer appraisal. Thus the problem of biased evaluation can be overcome.

4. Overall course evaluation

Evaluation is a cyclical process. It is done both before and after the course. Pre-use evaluation is conducted in relation to the material to be selected for the course. To assess the suitability of the material in-use evaluation is conducted and post-use evaluation is conducted at the end of the course. Students can be involved in post use evaluation. It is useful to check if all the components of the course are in congruency and harmony.

The data obtained from course evaluation helps one to decide whether a course needs to be modified or altered in any way so that objectives may be achieved more effectively. It also helps to determine why some learners fail to achieve the goals and objectives set for a course, it is necessary to determine why this is so. As a result of evaluating a course, one can have some idea about what measures might be taken to remedy any shortcomings. Therefore evaluation is considered not simply a process of obtaining information, but also a decision-making process (Nunan, 1988 as cited in Nunan, 1992).

Curriculum evaluation focuses on many different aspects like assessing the quality of a language program and estimating how successfully it works. The relevance of syllabus and course content, implementation of classroom processes teachers performance, learners' perceptions and their progress, learner motivation, learning environment, the institution and resources used (Sanders 1992, Weir and Roberts, 1994 as cited in Richards, 2009). A course is evaluated to promote and improve its effectiveness it is done

for the benefit of teacher, students, and course administrators and also for policy reasons. Evaluating a course includes evaluation of each and every element of the course like assumptions about students' needs or backgrounds, goals and objectives, materials and activities, students' progress, student participation, student roles and the teacher roles, sponsor satisfaction, quality of learning, quality of teaching, quality of course administration. (Graves, 1996). In curriculum design formative evaluation is carried out during the development and implementation of the curriculum in order to modify it as it is developed and summative evaluation is carried out after the implementation of the curriculum to assess its success and to improve it for future implementation (Brown, 1989 as cited in Graves, 1996).

A course can be evaluated in a number of different ways. A teacher can evaluate the course by closely observing what the students do in class and how they do. If the students find it difficult to do a task, then the relevance of the objectives and the activity can be questioned. An informal chat with the students also gives a lot of information as responses to a formal questionnaire. Teachers can also give students a chance to give their feedback orally or in written form. Above all these techniques the teacher's own reflection and self-evaluation can be quite helpful (Graves, 1996). It is observed that there is no one best way of conducting evaluation, a lot is said to depend on the purpose of evaluation, the nature of the programme or project that is being evaluated, the individuals associated with the programme, the participants, their personalities and their interrelationships and also the timescales and available resources (Alderson & Beretta, 2001).

5. Conclusion

Generally a language course is multi-dimensional in nature. It aims at the overall language and personality development of the learner. The goals and objectives are realistic and achievable. If the group of learners is homogenous with almost the same level of language proficiency and similar professional goals and specific language needs, it allows the learners to participate and succeed as a group with coordination and cooperation by helping each other achieve the common goal that is set. The instructor should encourage the learners to work in groups and at the same time impart strategies to work individually and help them become effective and independent language learners so that they can continue to learn even after the completion of the course. The skills which are required become clear once they actually start to perform the job and the self-learning skills are fit to use during that time. Generally it is difficult to meet and fulfil all the stated objectives in a short term-course. But with effective designing of the course and efficient deliverance the success of an ESP course can be achieved.

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