Original Paper

Effectiveness of ESP Based Learning: Teaching Work Related English to Medical Secretary Studies Students

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Abstract

This paper was concerned with designing an English for occupational purposes (EOP) course for 3rd grade medical secretary studies students. The authors examined both the needs of the students taking the course and the target workplace in order to produce suitable materials. This research identified some of the English skills necessary for medical secretaries to work in Japan. The authors found that tailoring material to the student group was effective and enhanced levels of motivation during activities, however, few students reached a high level of confidence performing the tasks. The authors suggest this may be because there is a large gap between the skills necessary to perform work activities and the level of students' English competency on entering the course. In order to bridge this gap, the authors suggested two possible strategies: either reducing the complexity of the skills that need to be mastered within a 15-week course, or dividing the skills into basic and advanced levels and teaching the course over two 15-week courses.

Background

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) originated in the late 1960's and early 1970's as a response to the growing predominance of English in academic use and international commerce [1]. Since that time it has further diversified into two main groups: English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) [2] [3]. Quantitively speaking, recent research has centered on EAP and discourse and genre analysis. However, as other commentators have stressed, the growth of Business English courses necessitates further research into EOP in order to monitor and refine its development [4] [5].

ESP courses start from the notion that learners have specific tasks they wish to perform using English and, therefore, the courses focus solely on the lexicon, grammar and communication strategies the learner must master in order to perform these tasks adequately. As Hutchinson and Waters commented, this is not to say that we focus solely on 'what the students are expected to cope with', but rather on 'what the students require in order to cope' [6]. Hence, ESP courses aim to teach a set of skills and develop a level of competency that will enable the learner to deal with real events that occur in the target situation. The cornerstone of this approach is an adequate needs analysis of the way English is used in target situation and the existing level of English proficiency in the target group of students.

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Student Analysis

In general it is thought that English education in Japanese high schools places a great deal of emphasis on grammar and reading comprehension, i.e. passive skills. The reason for this has traditionally been thought to be the wash-back effect [7]. The wash-back effect states that because grammar and reading skills are tested by universities in their entrance examinations, high schools teach them in order for their students to gain entrance to good universities. However, the reasons for this trend have been called into question [8] as the growth of universities in the 1980's and a drastic decline in the student population have made entering universities far easier. Even though the reasons for teaching these types of skills remain unclear, the practice still seems to be continuing. Results from questionnaires administered to 1st year students entering our degree program in April 2007 found that speaking constituted only 9% of the total English curriculum they studied at high school (Table 1). By the time students get to university they have few experiences of applying English skills in a practical environment which makes studying practical English skills in university all the more important for students who want to use English in the workplace in the future.

Table 1   High School English Study Skills

Skills Area	%
Grammar	33
Reading Comprehension	27
Translation	20
Speaking	10
Other	10

Results from 39 completed questionnaires

The aim of the course we designed was to teach business English to a group of 3rd grade medical secretary studies students studying in a university in Japan. These students have spent the previous year studying medical administration courses in their native language and performing work experience in an affiliated hospital. This means they have studied very little English over the proceeding years. The students are predominantly female and intend to work as administrative assistants to doctors. Furthermore the business English course is a required one, meaning English ability varies greatly amongst the students. Before running this course as a required course, we provided it as an elective course and performed interviews with the students to ensure the activities and assumed skill levels were suitable for the target group. As much as possible we tried to use content that would be appealing to the age and gender make-up of the student body.

Target Situation Analysis

In terms of needs analysis of the target situation, we conducted interviews with doctors and tutors in the field of medical administration to ascertain the types of function the students would perform as part of their work duties. These interviews yielded the following key skills: (1) medical translation, e.g. checking papers, (2) using the telephone, e.g. receiving calls and taking messages, (3) writing letters and making orders by e-mail, and, (4) making arrangements for seminars. All of these activities, with the exception of medical translation, fall within the boundaries of the key communicative events of Business English [9] and so we decided to select building competence towards these skills as the basis for the course.

Course Design

As has been noted, a good ESP course should identify what is necessary to bridge the gap between the demands of the target situation and the existing English skills of the students and focus on how to achieve a level of competence [10] that enables the non-native speaker to perform these activities well. Therefore, we decided the course should, (1) prepare students for the variability of native utterances, (2) focus on practical skills for using the telephone, e-mail and making arrangements for seminars, (3) teach relevant communication techniques based on activities students can visualize as part of their future work, (4) prepare students for non Japanese counting systems, and, (5) teach students methods of addressing others in speech and writing.

Intonation and word stress are techniques used by native speakers to add emphasis and clarify meaning. As has been noted [11], using advanced techniques relating to secondary stress are likely to be confusing for elementary learners, however basic techniques provide a powerful way to interpret others' utterances and refine your own. For example, repeating phrases with a rising intonation as a method of requesting verification and stressing different words to alter meaning were taught in the course. Furthermore, work related functions such as ordering, or connecting a caller were interwoven with communication verification techniques, notional aspects such as understanding how familiarity and politeness affect forms of address and phrase selection, and fluency practice with numbers, including time zones, dates, currencies, prices and telephone numbers.

These skills and concepts are introduced in a building block approach of nested skills that introduce the target language and techniques in small, easy to master blocks. Each block of skills is tested individually and sequentially as the students are studying. Over and above this sequential testing, the students are aware a more complicated, examined task that requires them to integrate these skills will be necessary later in the course. One such example is a test which requires students to plan the travel arrangements of a group of doctors coming from different countries to attend a medical seminar in Japan. In this example, the final practical test performed in pairs in front of the tutor. The students take the test as many times as they want to improve their performance and grade; some students came back 3 or 4 times in order to get the dialogue running smoothly.

Active information sourcing of products that appeal to the students was also a focal part of this course. For example, students used English websites to source products for import such as handbags and accessories from the current Vivienne Westwood collection.

Course Effectiveness

We performed a pre-course, mid-course and post-course needs analysis, like other researchers [12], however, we did not use test results as a method of assessment for the effectiveness of the course. The pre-course and post course assessment consisted of a questionnaire to gauge the attitudinal change in the students. Mid-course assessment consisted of informal interviews after tests to see how the students were reacting to the techniques we were using. During the lessons we listened to the students performing tasks and, if the students were having difficulty, discussed what was causing the problem. At the end of the course the students were told their grade and were given an opportunity to raise any issues or concerns they had about the course either in an interview or anonymously in writing. In this way, as Van Lier suggests [13], we used a variety of research methods, i.e. testing, observations, interviews and normal feedback, to assess the learning environment.

Subjects

The questionnaires were administered to 3rd year students in 2007. The questionnaires were volitional and anonymous and students were told of their intended use. In the pre-course questionnaire 74 question-naires were collected and 72 were acceptable for analysis. In the post-course questionnaire 69 questionnaires were collected and 68 were acceptable for analysis.

Method

The questionnaire required students to express their level of agreement with a set of statements regarding their knowledge of relevant phrases and their confidence to perform actions in English; students were asked whether they 'Strongly Agreed', 'Slightly Agreed', 'Slightly Disagreed' or 'Strongly Disagreed'. By using a points system a mean figure, which expressed the attitude of the group towards each statement, was found. This was achieved by using 2 points for a very positive response, 1 point for a slightly positive response, -1 point for a slightly negative response and -2 points for a very negative response. By adding together the responses of the whole group and then working out the mean before and after the course we can see how the group's attitudes have changed as a whole.

Results

In the following example zero represents neither a feeling of confidence nor lack of confidence, -2 to -1 shows a very low level of confidence, -1 to zero shows a low level of confidence, zero to 1 shows a reasonable level of confidence, and 1 to 2 shows a high level of confidence (Table 2).

Table 2　Mean score results for selected techniques

	Mean Score		
Technique	Pre	Post	Change
1. I know techniques for resolving communication problems on the phone.	-1.24	-0.65	**0.59**
2. I think I can resolve communication problems encountered on the phone.	-1.13	0.54	**1.67**
3. I know the techniques and phrases needed to answer a telephone call.	-1.35	-0.29	**1.05**
4. I think I can answer a call well in English.	-1.39	-0.59	**0.80**
5. I know how to exchange currencies.	-0.94	-0.71	**0.24**
6. I can exchange currencies.	-0.83	-0.56	**0.27**
7. I understand the difference between saying telephone numbers in Japanese and English.	-0.11	0.94	**1.05**
8. I can say telephone numbers in English without any problems.	-0.61	0.84	**1.45**
9. I know how to write e-mails in English.	-1.25	0.21	**1.46**
10. I could make an order by e-mail in English.	-1.44	-0.32	**1.12**
11. I could write an e-mail about a problem with an order in English.	-1.63	-0.43	**1.20**
Total (based on examples above and other scores)	**-1.04**	**-0.18**	**0.86**

Discussion

The first point to note is that the initial level of student confidence was particularly low, with the majority of pre-course scores below -1. Student confidence in relation to e-mails was particularly low and, considering the importance of e-mail to modern business, this was an important finding of the research.

E-mail skills were taught through writing e-mails in pairs, one person taking on the role of supplier and the other of purchaser. The post-course results show the active method of study was an effective way of teaching basic principles of e-mail communication. However, post course figures for techniques 10 and 11 remained below zero, showing that although the students' confidence increased they still felt low levels of confidence. We suggest if students had more time to practice these skills their confidence levels would increase further still.

The largest change in attitude, 1.67 for technique 2, occurred in relation to resolving communication problems on the phone. We suggest the reason for this improvement was partly because the skills were introduced early and tested on numerous occasions throughout the course. This is an example of the nested skills approach, i.e. assessing the skill in isolation and then reassessing the skill within a more complex activity. It could be argued that this large increase in confidence is a direct result of the nested building block skills approach to teaching EOP. Other examples of the effectiveness of the nested skills approach are techniques 7 and 8, which recorded the highest levels of confidence, 0.94, and 0.84 respectively. Although these skills are simple in essence, the students had to master native intonation and rhythm patterns to perform these activities smoothly in tests.

Technique 2 scored 0.54, whereas technique 1, which relates to knowing the techniques in order to perform technique 2, scored -0.65. This indicates the students feel confident in actively resolving communication problems, however they feel less than confident about knowing the techniques in order to resolve these problems. This initially seems counter-intuitive; how can you lack confidence about knowing a technique and yet feel confident performing it? However, it could be argued this is the result of an active, practice based method of learning; instead of emphasizing techniques in isolation, students are required to use them in context. Hence, they feel more confident performing the action than knowing all the technical phrases.

Exchanging currencies, techniques 5 and 6, showed only small improvements. It could be argued this was partly due to the limited time the students had to study these techniques combined with the initially low level of understanding. When creating these materials we had anticipated communication problems when using numbers over 10,000; this is when the English and Japanese counting systems start to diverge. The pilot study performed with elective students suggested that using large numbers would be suitable, however the results for techniques 5 and 6 show that this assumption was wrong. Whilst offering help to students performing the practical elements of this component, we noticed students were having difficulty with numbers over 100, not 10,000. We only allotted one week for introduction and isolated testing of the skills and then required the students to use these skills in applied tests within two weeks. This shows the dangers in basing a required course on the findings made for an elective one; the differing needs of these groups should be considered in order to schedule the curriculum properly.

Although the level of confidence increased in relation to all the skills, the overall post course score was still a negative figure; rising from -1.04 at the beginning of the course to -0.18 at the end which indicates moving from a state of low confidence to a state of neither feeling confident nor lacking confidence. These figures show alterations need to be made to the course to make it more suitable to the level of the students, either the objectives of the course need to be lowered or the delivery methods need to be reassessed.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research has identified some of the English skills necessary for a medical secretary and has developed a method of introducing these skills. We found that performing needs analysis and tailoring materials to the specific make-up of the student group enhanced levels of motivation and interest during activities.

We found a considerable gap between the skills necessary to perform the target work activities and the level of students' English on entering the course. We suggest bridging this gap in a 15-week program is unrealistic. In order to resolve this issue we believe the best strategies are either to reduce the complexity and amount of the existing course material or extend the length of the course from 15 to 30 weeks. We suggest that further research should include reference to individual student's course results so we can see if there is a relationship between the ability of the student and the progress they make. This may make apparent whether a multi-level approach to activities may be more effective.

Acknowledgements

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