English for porters – ESP curriculum development

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Abstract: Designing an English language curriculum that is relevant to students' needs and empowers them to use their language skills in real life situations with respect to their job is the focus of English for Specific Purposes. This paper addresses both the theoretical peculiarities of designing an authentic and valuable ESP course in English for Porters, as well as the actual process of implementing it. Fundamental principals of ESP are explained in the theoretical part. Research carried out through questionnaires established the basis for a detailed profile of the porters' needs. This paved the way for creating a coursebook and an intensive course that directly mirrors the demand. Implementing such a course may benefit porters at other universities as it gives them a specific set of tools and enables them to communicate in English in their work.

Key words: ESP (English for Specific Purposes), porters, curriculum development, coursebook design

Introduction

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) undoubtedly holds a prominent place in English language teaching and learning. With the on-going need for international communication, English is the *lingua franca* serving the immediate needs of various work-related situations. This paper attempts to contribute to the field of ESP, specifically by discussing the issue of English for porters. In the first part of the article, a review of the literature is provided. The first section gives information on the place of ESP in English language teaching, characteristics of ESP and design of an ESP curriculum. The following section describes the rationale of the research and design of the particular study. The outcomes of the project are given in the last section. They comprise a description of questionnaire results and an introduction to the coursebook which is used in the course *English for Porters*, taught at the Institute of Applied Language Studies, at the University of West Bohemia.

1 Theoretical background

In recent years, there have been an increasing number of international students and university employees coming to the Czech Republic. According to the annual reports of the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen (UWB), in five years' time, the number of foreign students and university employees coming to UWB has grown significantly, namely 346 students and 24 university employees in 2010 and 484 students and 136 university employees in 2015 (Výroční zpráva o činnosti, 2010; 2015). As a result, a need to increase the communication skills of porters, who are often the first people in contact with international visitors at the university, has emerged.

It is without any doubt that English is an international language that is used as a means of communication worldwide. Focusing on educating people in specific professions and equipping them with the knowledge and skills that help them communicate in their profession in English is widely known as English for Specific Purposes (ESP). The following paragraphs introduce ESP and its place within the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), as well as some of the basic characteristics and principles that make English for Specific Purposes come to life through meaningful curricula and fulfil its purpose with respect to the needs, in this case, of the University of West Bohemia.

1.1 The place of ESP in English language teaching

Most of the time, English is learnt as English for General Purposes (EGP). As Richards (2001) puts it, it is learnt simply "for its own sake, or to pass a general examination" (p. 28). In other words, it is taught without necessarily being useful in a given contextual situation. As for English for Specific purposes, there is a clear incentive to learn the language. The term *specific* is sometimes used interchangeably with *special* or *specialized*. Mackay and Mountford describe the notion of *specific* as "a restricted repertoire of words and expressions selected from the whole language because [it] covers every requirement within a well defined context, task or vocation" (as cited in Javid, 2015, p. 17).

Johns & Price-Machado (2001) argue that all good language teaching should be tailored to the target audience while taking the sociocultural contexts into account (p. 43). That would imply that any kind of language teaching is a kind of ESP because teachers are aware of their students' abilities, differences in needs, interests, etc. and alter their approach accordingly. While this holds true to some extent, it is important to differentiate between a teacher's personalized approach to students and teaching English for Specific Purposes. Simply said, in ESP, students are studying in order to develop or improve the language skills useful for their profession. The most important point to be considered is that the students of ESP are studying to "perform a role [and] the measure of success is [...] whether they can perform convincingly" in that role (Richards, 2001, p. 33).

There are a number of taxonomies that explain the place of ESP and its further divisions. It is important to note that a language always reflects the needs of the people who use it, and that ESP therefore constantly evolves to respond to new needs.

1.2 Characteristics of ESP

Despite the constant evolution of ESP, there are several basic characteristics that have not changed over time. Strevens states that for ESP to be effective, it must be:

- focused on the learner's needs and [waste] no time
- relevant to the learner
- successful in imparting learning
- more cost-effective than General English (as cited in Johns and Price-Machado, 2001, p. 43 and Khalid, 2016, p. 38).

Other scholars support Strevens's characteristics. Dudley-Evans and St. John define ESP by:

- specific needs of the intended language learning
- activities to demonstrate the real language use
- appropriate grammar and lexis (as cited in Brunton, 2009, p. 2).

Tošić and Aleksić (2015) stress the importance of ESP in the context of communication for various purposes at an international level and cluster characteristics of ESP around three key areas that define the concept of ESP. Firstly, there is the development of different fields of academic and professional cooperation, each of which, naturally, asks for a specific language of communication, e.g. technical, business, medical. Secondly, the issues discussed become less general and more topic-bound, which requires specific terminology. Both these matters lead to the third: the role of the language learner has changed. The learner has a central role in ESP, and the content taught is thus determined accordingly. Furthermore, the whole ESP methodology evolves from satisfying students' goals. In the course of time, ESP tasks have placed more and more emphasis on communication, both spoken and written, in connection with demands of the particular students (Lee, 2016).

To sum up the characteristics of ESP, it is obvious that the key issue is a learner-centered approach. As Lee (2016) puts it, despite the myriads of language usage, the successful ESP course reflects demands of the specific field of work or research. Thus, the courses are specifically tailored to their students. In order to design such a course, it is necessary to obtain information about what the students need from the course.

1.3 Designing an ESP curriculum

Conducting needs analysis is a core step in changing the approach to designing an ESP curriculum. Richards (2001) states that "rather than developing a course around an analysis of the language, an ESP approach starts with an analysis of the learner's needs" (p. 32). In other words, the ESP approach has the students' best interest at heart and attempts to design the curriculum around their needs. Richards (2001) goes on to say that "in ESP learner's needs are often described in terms of performance, that is, regarding what the learner will be able to do with

the language at the end of a course" (p. 33). There is a quote from the year 1962 by Barber which Khalid (2016) mentions as the most quoted and still viable: Tell me what you need English for and I'll tell you the English you need.

There is a universal model of a needs analysis—the Munby model. Notwithstanding it being developed in 1978, it has become a reference point that is, only with subtle alterations, still used today. Put simply, it attempts to create a profile of the learners' communicative needs in order to create a course that will be the best possible (Khalid, 2016, p. 41). Schutz and Derwing divided the model into nine components and they are as follows:

1. personal – culturally significant information about the individual, such as language background
2. purpose – occupational or educational objective for which the target language is required
3. setting – physical and psychosocial setting in which the target language is required
4. interactional variables – such as the role relationships to be involved in the target language use
5. medium, mode, and channel – communicative means
6. dialects – information on dialects to be utilized
7. target level – level of competence required in the target language
8. anticipated communicative events – micro- and macro-activities
9. key – the specific manner in which communication is actually carried out (as cited in Richards, 2001, p. 34).

Moreover, it should not be forgotten that different purposes of an ESP course require a different level of broadness/narrowness of language input. The language needed should be examined in concordance with the particular situations, utterances and skills to be learnt (Brunton, 2016).

There are a number of possibilities of collecting data to comply with the requirements needed, such as questionnaires, interviews, observation, job-shadowing, etc. (Johns & Price Machado, 2001, p. 49). According to Brunton (2016), the preliminary survey brings valuable information for ESP coursebook design that is realistic, motivational and authentic. The grammar and vocabulary should correspond with the objectives of the course and the four language skills (listening, reading, speaking and writing) should be well-balanced (Brunton, 2009; Lee, 2016).

Based on these theoretical premises, a description of porters' ESP needs at the University of West Bohemia is outlined in the following sections.

2 Method

In summer 2015, there was a request at the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen (UWB) to improve basic English communicative skills of porters at this university. These university employees increasingly come into everyday contact with people who do not necessarily speak Czech. Porters from different buildings of all university faculties found themselves in situations when they were asked questions in English by people coming from different countries.

2.1 Participants

The target audience of this project was a group of twenty-six UWB porters which consisted of middle-aged men and women. The following information was, however, gathered from twenty-three porters, as three were not present at work when the data was collected. The ages of the research participants ranged from 50–60 years old (30%) to over 60 years old (70%) and their gender ratio comprised 52% males and 48% females. As for the level of English language knowledge, 14 porters (61%) were beginners and 9 (39%) were false beginners. 19 porters (82%) had experienced encountering English-speaking foreigners coming to UWB porters' lodges, while only 4 (17%) had not.

2.2 The questionnaires

The questionnaires included 33 items presented in 6 categories and were distributed in a monitored environment in order to elicit as much quality data as possible. To obtain complex answers, the questionnaire was distributed by the course designers, who checked if all questions were clearly answered. In case of need, they asked for clarification or elaboration. The porters could also add any comments and wishes regarding the course. The language used was Czech to prevent the porters from misunderstanding the question items. The first part of the questionnaire (1 item) focused on the porters' background in learning English, i.e. their existing knowledge of English, and experience with English-speaking foreigners coming to UWB porters' lodges (1 item). The second part of the questionnaire, consisting of 23 items, aimed to identify the type of issues and questions the university porters are asked to deal with. The final part of the questionnaire (8 items) focused on the different learning styles and techniques the university porters had used or would prefer to use.

2.3 Research design

The starting point for creating a language course curriculum, and especially for an ESP course, was the language needs analysis. Based on the literature concerning different perspectives, methods and recommendations, we opted to find information on:

- existing English language skills and knowledge of porters at UWB
- topics, phrases and vocabulary porters find useful to know in English for their profession
- learning styles and strategies the porters prefer

A language knowledge and needs analysis is absolutely necessary prior to applying a responsible approach towards developing the content and methodology of a course. The research instrument to help us design the course and coursebook was a questionnaire, which focused on collecting data on the three issues mentioned above. On the basis of the questionnaire findings, a curriculum was designed, a suitable coursebook was written and an intensive course for university porters was provided.

Generally speaking, the whole project included five main phases:

1. designing and distributing the questionnaire
2. analysing the answers of the questionnaire
3. designing the course based on the specific needs of UWB porters
4. creating a suitable coursebook
5. teaching the course *English for Porters*

3 Outcomes of the project

3.1 Questionnaire results

The results of the questionnaire showed that the university porters had no or very little proficiency in English. The enquiries from foreigners porters received ranged from asking for directions to university buildings, classrooms, offices, departments, university canteen, library, cloakroom, to questions about phone numbers, emergency situations, lost-and-found or treatment of minor injuries. The particular enquiry topics and their response rates which exceeded 60% are illustrated in Table 1—Enquiries porters received. It should be noted that some of the questions included were open-ended, such as: "Please, give other questions you had to deal with." This question was asked with the purpose of encouraging the widest possible range of answers. The responses to the final section of the questionnaire showed that the most common learning styles used were a mixture of visual, aural, verbal, logical, social and solitary styles.

3.2 Course and coursebook design

The course and coursebook *English for Porters* were designed on the basis of the analysis of questionnaire results and the subsequent creation of the profile of

Tab. 1: *Enquiries porters received*

Enquiry topic	Response rate
Leaving a letter for somebody	91%
Reporting a found object	91%
Asking for directions to a classroom	87%
Asking for directions to a campus building	87%
Asking for directions to a restroom	87%
Reporting loss of an object	87%
Asking for directions to a study department	74%
Asking for a teacher's office/classroom	74%
Asking for a phone number	70%
Asking for treatment of minor injuries	65%
Asking for directions to a faculty	61%
Asking for directions to a library	61%
Asking for directions to a copy room	61%
Requesting an emergency call	61%

the porters' needs, as stated above. It contains three main parts. The course was taught on three consecutive days, each covering one part.

The first part enables the porters to learn:

- greetings and introductions
- the English alphabet
- numbers 0–20
- designation of buildings and rooms
- practical vocabulary related to porters' needs—nouns
- practical vocabulary related to porters' needs—verbs

This part offers a comprehensive range of various exercises and activities including pair work and group work, odd-one-out exercises, matching exercises, pronunciation practice and role-plays.

The second part of the course focuses mainly on:

- giving directions
- practical vocabulary related to porters' needs—university landmarks
- names of the faculties
- practical vocabulary related to porters' needs—city landmarks
- practise giving directions

This part is accompanied by simplified university maps, dialogues, role-plays and useful phrases. It builds on the first part and serves as an ideal tool for basic conversation the porters might need.

The third part is devoted to some simple grammar points:

- positive and negative imperatives
- verb CAN
- verb BE
- useful phrases

All the explanations used in this part are accompanied by many concrete examples and practised through various exercises. The language used for explaining the grammar is Czech. The coursebook is supplemented by a final revision, several extra maps and model conversations.

As for the organization of the course, the UWB porters were put into two groups, with 13 porters each, and the course lasted for three days at five hours per day distributed over three mornings or three afternoons, to comply with the porters' work responsibilities.

In spite of the fact that the time frame of the course was very limited, the learners demonstrated a high degree of maturity, motivation, enthusiasm and willingness to learn. Based on an evaluation questionnaire given to the porters after finishing the course, 94% of them were satisfied with the course and coursebook. Concerning the usefulness of the course, 56% of the porters strongly believe and 38% (simply) believe the course would be beneficial when encountering English-speaking visitors. This was positively surprising, bearing in mind that it is considerably demanding to start learning a new language as an adult, in such a short time and with a specific focus related to the needs of one's profession.

The main shortcoming of the course was the limited time. This was determined by the conditions of the project. Nevertheless, the experience was rewarding, enriching and enjoyable for both the students and the teachers of the course. In addition, another reward came when other Czech universities, which felt that they could benefit from a similar workplace English programme tailored to their needs, expressed interest in using this course. Namely, these were Charles University in Prague (150 coursebooks), Masaryk University in Brno (50 coursebooks) and University of Chemistry and Technology in Prague (10 coursebooks).

Conclusion

The intention of this paper was to describe the concept of a course on *English for Porters* and its placement within the scope of ESP. The main requirement for

the design of an effective ESP course is an analysis of the specific requirements of potential students. Based on an analysis of the questionnaire results, an English course for porters in the Czech Republic was designed, and a coursebook for this course created. The coursebook focuses on vocabulary, phrases and sentences useful to porters for helping people find their way around the university campus. Taking part in the course not only contributed to developing English communication skills, but also helped porters become more confident in their job when encountering foreigners.

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