5th International Conference EDU-WORLD 2012 - Education Facing Contemporary World Issues

Designing an English course for adult non-philological students in long-life learning education

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Abstract

This article will describe briefly some of the language needs of the undergraduate students doing mechanical engineering within long-life learning education at “Ovidius” University and the programme which is being developed to satisfy these needs. Many of these students have considerable language problems during their first year, despite the fact that they have studied English for about four or eight years at secondary school and high school.

The main initial need of these students is to be able to follow lectures and take notes, to be able to understand a wide variety of text including diagrams, tables, graphs, course brochures and job advertisements, to be able to write simple descriptions and explanations of components and processes, to write study-and work-related letters, and last but not least, to communicate about engineering topics.

Keywords: Needs analysis, objectives setting, placement tests, authentic language, materials evaluation, textbook design, communicative approach

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1. Introduction

Course design involves putting the theoretical decisions about objectives and syllabus into a context. There are various ways of viewing this context.

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2. Setting the objectives

As the general objective of an ESP course is “to enable learners to function adequately in a target situation” [1, p.13] we need to trace out the target situation, that the situation in which learners will use the language. The target learners in our case are adult students in engineering in long-life learning education.

The next step is to identify these learners’ needs, taking into account the specific purposes for which learners will use the language in their jobs, the starting level of proficiency, their motivation, etc. This process of identifying learners’ needs is usually known as needs analysis. This stage is particularly important as it is the guiding line in the whole process of ESP course, on the basis of which the specific course objectives can be defined. As to our target learners, the specific objectives aim at all-round skills improvement such as:

- **Listening** – to understand native speakers, professionals, and students, talking about their work and study
- - to understand experts talking informally about aspects of engineering
- **Speaking** – to communicate about engineering topics
- **Reading** – to understand a wide variety of text including diagrams, tables, graphs, course brochures, and job advertisements
- - to compare different sources of information, written and spoken
- **Writing** – to write simple descriptions and explanations of components and processes
- - to write study-and work-related letters, e-mails, reports, etc

After having determined students’ necessities, the following step is to determine their level of proficiency, in other words, their lacks. This is to be done through tests, placement tests, during their first meeting. These placement tests enable to sort students into groups according to their language ability at the beginning of the course. Such a test should be as general as possible and should concentrate on testing a wide and representative range of ability in English. The most important part of the test should consist of questions directly concerned with the specific language skills which students will require on their course. [2]

Besides specific objectives and placement tests there is another aspect that should be taken into account when designing such a course: learners’ motivation. The teacher should try to find out what the students expects from the course. This third stage in a needs analysis can be done through questionnaires and discussions with the students. As stated, there is often a conflict between learners’ necessities (as perceived by the teacher) and their wants. Thus, the teacher is expected to find some sort of compromise between these conflicting elements by designing a course that should be useful and interesting for the students. [3]

3. Textbook design
We have to recognize that very few English teachers have specialist knowledge of engineering. However, most ESP teachers have a general interest in their students’ specialist field and they should introduce authentic language, language as it is used by native speakers in real life situations, as often as possible. Since the students are current / future specialists who need English for their profession, it is extremely important that they should be exposed to authentic language as frequent as possible.

The materials should be used from authentic texts, diagrams, and listening passages, at a level suitable for the interested lay person.

The register should be popular science and should not pose problems for teachers.

Tasks given to the students should encourage them to combine knowledge of English and knowledge of their subject. Homework and self-study tasks should have the most specialist content.

The following table 1 shows the relationship between activity, teacher /student focus, and text register that should help in designing an engineering course [4]:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Teacher-Student focus</th>
<th>Register of text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Presentation</td>
<td>Teacher-led</td>
<td>Popular science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice</td>
<td>Student-centred</td>
<td>Semi-technical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-guided</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Production and self-study</td>
<td>Student-centred</td>
<td>Technical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher-monitored</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. Methodology

While needs analysis is mainly concerned with language use, there is another aspect in course design: language learning. How are going the students to learn, which are teaching methods that the teacher should apply during the course?

The communicative approach seems to be the most appropriate teaching theory for an English engineering course. The main purpose of such a course being the ability to communicate effectively in a given situation, the students should be taught how to use the language for real communication. The aim of the teacher who uses the communicative approach is to “have one’s students become communicatively competent” [5].

The learners are not expected to learn about language, they are expected to learn the language through using it. All four skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing) can be used during the course and the main issues concerning grammar and vocabulary are inferred from the communication itself.

The teacher should not focus only on this approach if the need analysis requires something different. He/ she may choose principles belonging to other teaching methods, such as grammar-translation method or the direct method and combine them in an appropriate style. Moreover, co-operative teaching is another best approach to language teaching for an ESP course as it means “collaboration between language and subject teachers” [6], establishing team teaching between disciplines as English and mechanical engineering. There some benefits of this approach both for the ESP teacher and the subject specialist, not to mention the fact that the student has most to gain:

- The student is given the opportunity to see how well he is measuring up to the requirements of his department, and to catch up on work not fully understood
- The language teacher is able to see at first hand what difficulties the students are having with their subject course, and to learn a little of the way communication takes place in a given subject
- The subject lecturer receives feedback on how well he has been communicating with his students.
A further benefit of \textit{team teaching} is given by the interaction between the two lecturers that could create a higher level of involvement among students, helping to overcome their fear of asking questions and of engaging in discussion.

The key requirement throughout is communication: communication between and among all members of the triangle formed by students, ESP teachers and subject specialists.

5. Conclusion

Being an ESP teacher is not easy. One of the prime requisites would seem to be flexibility, the flexibility to change from being a general language teacher to being a specific purpose teacher, and the flexibility to cope with different groups of students – and a willingness to try new approaches and methods when designing an ESP course for a particular group of current/future specialists, in our case engineering students in long-life learning education. Being an effective teacher of ESP in long-life learning education requires more experience, additional training, extra effort, a fresh commitment. He/she should follow the three main stages in designing an English engineering course: setting the objectives of the course on the basis of need analysis of the learners’ necessities, lacks and wants, as well as the choice of the appropriate materials and teaching methods.

References