

Developing an English for Specific Purposes Course Using a Learner Centered Approach: A Russian Experience

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English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is a young and developing branch of EFL in Russia. As T. Nazarova (1996) shows, for many years ESP instruction was limited to training special lexicon and translating numerous texts. Of course, such methods did not reflect students' interests and resulted in low learner motivation and poor participation. With the spread of the student-centered approach in Russia and the continued increase of international contacts in various spheres, much attention has been paid to the design of ESP courses that can prepare students for professional communication. However, developing new courses along such lines raises the issue of training teachers. Designing a course that can best serve learners' interests and needs is an obstacle for many instructors. How can teachers develop a new course? Where should they start? What can be done about students' poor motivation? How should teaching materials be selected? These are some of the questions that are often asked by many teachers. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to suggest a framework for an ESP course-development process that will help teachers with some of the problems they may come across in designing a new ESP course.

1. Students' Analysis

It is very important to start the course-developing process with an analysis of the target group of students: many problems in L2 classes are a result of teachers not paying attention to learners' interests and ignoring students as a source of essential information. With the spread of communicative language teaching (CLT), much emphasis in second language (L2) methodology has been paid to the learner-oriented instruction. As a result, needs analysis has been given considerable attention in making a particular course serve a particular group's interests (Graves K., 1996; Harrison R., 1996; Hutchison T. & A. Waters, 1987; Vorobieva N., 1996). However, students can provide much more valuable information for teachers than an expression of their needs (Sysoyev P., 1999). Therefore, a better term than needs analysis might be students analysis.

Students' analysis can give two kinds of information. The first reflects learners' "possession" - their current level in their L2-ESP, field knowledge in L1 and/or L2, motivation, methods of learning they have experienced, etc. The second represents what learners want to achieve - what traditionally has been called "ESP needs".

Two kinds of information consequently correspond to two levels of knowledge presented in S. Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1985), also known as $i + 1$ Hypothesis. According to the study, i represents students' current level of L2 competence, and $+ 1$ is a level of ESP proficiency beyond their present level.

Similar to S. Krashen's theory is L. Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) in which there are two main stages of an individual's development. The first stage is what a child or learner can do by himself. The second stage is his potential, what he can accomplish with the help of another, more competent person. The distance between two stages is called the ZPD. Vygotsky also introduced a notion of a mediator - a person who helps students

achieve what they cannot do by themselves. In the teaching of ESP, the role of mediator will be placed on the teacher, who will start from students' current stage and bring them to the second stage of their needs.

There may be different ways of finding information about students' needs and previous experience. At the university and high school levels, it can be done through various questionnaires, surveys, group discussions, individual talks, etc. For example, Business English students may be asked to list areas in which everyone foresees using ESP (for instance, selling insurance, opening bank accounts, dealing with foreign customers in currency exchange offices, translating business documents from English into Russian, etc.).

Even though very important, students' data should not be overused. Finding out this information does not mean that teachers should teach only what their students want. Of course, teaching cannot take place in isolation. There are certain things, such as curriculum, institutional guidelines, and standardization, that cannot and may not be ignored. However, in developing a new course, students' analysis will help teachers bring together the required and desired in formulating goals and objectives, conceptualizing the content of the course, selecting teaching materials, and course assessment, as we are going to examine in this paper.

2. Formulation of Goals and Objectives of the Course

Formulating goals and objectives for a particular course allows the teacher to create a clear picture of what the course is going to be about. As K. Graves (1996) explains, goals are general statements or the final destination, the level students will need to achieve. Objectives express certain ways of achieving the goals. In other words, objectives are teachable chunks, which in their accumulation form the essence of the course. Clear understanding of goals and objectives will help teachers to be sure what material to teach, and when and how it should be taught. In his book D. Nunan (1988) gives a clear description of how one should state objectives. Depending on what is desired, objectives may sound like the following:

- Students will learn that ...
- Students will be aware of ...
- Students will develop ...

It is also important to state realistic and achievable goals and objectives.

3. Conceptualizing the Content

Several years ago, ESP teaching in Russia was characterized by the structural approach. From year to year, different students with the same or similar majors had to use exactly the same textbooks and syllabuses. But all students are different and with the rapid development of the world, changes in students' needs and interests are inevitable. Therefore, ideally, in establishing a learner-centered approach there should be a shift in L2 pedagogy in the selection of the content of the course. This shift should serve the learners' interests and needs.

Conceptualizing the content is not a context-free process. When taking into account information about the students, goals, and objectives, teachers need to determine which aspects of ESP learning will be included, emphasized, integrated, and used as a core of the course to address students' needs and expectations. There may be different ways of conceptualizing the content. Teachers can focus on developing "basic skills", communicative competence, intercultural competence, vocabulary awareness, etc. For example, an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course for Russian high school students who are going to participate in a foreign exchange program can be conceptualized around L2 culture.

One of the goals of this course, for instance, is to achieve intercultural communicative competence. Students are developing language skills, but it is accomplished through the integration of the

sociocultural component into the teaching various elements of the language.

It should also become clear that even though separated in structural charts, all skills and aspects of the language are interwoven in the real communication. Therefore, they should be treated, taught, and tested as one inseparable unit.

4. Selecting and Developing ESP Materials

For many teachers, selection of teaching materials is based on their availability. Furthermore, chosen materials determine the content of the course. Quite often it serves as a justification and explanation of the use of the same syllabus with different students. In student-centered instruction, the appropriateness of materials includes student comfort and familiarity with the material, language level, interest, and relevance.

However, in some situations teachers are dependent on the materials and are required to use the same textbook over and over again. Potentially there is nothing bad in using the same teaching materials, if everything is conceptualized through a learner-centered approach. The same article or audio story can be used for developing reading or listening comprehension skills, cultural awareness, expanding vocabulary, etc. Thus, as K. Graves points out, teaching materials are "tools that can be figuratively cut up into component pieces and then rearranged to suite the needs, abilities, and interests of the students in the course (Graves K., 1996: 27).

5. Course Planning

After formulating major objectives and choosing teaching material, many teachers start planning a new course. There may be different ways of organizing activities. In CLT the following pattern is traditionally used: "pre-activity ? activity ? follow up". Teachers start with what students already know or with a fairly simple task, and then pass to more complex activities. Another approach to "recycling" materials has recently become quite popular. Students learn information about the L2 country and then recycle it in the activity about the L1 country. In this way, the "Dialogue of Cultures" principle is achieved. It is recommended that teachers be flexible in course planning, i.e. that they be ready adjust the syllabus and make slight changes in the course while teaching, so that they can best address students interests and needs.

6. Evaluating the Course

Course evaluation is the last, but not the least, important stage. Teachers should evaluate their courses to improve and promote their effectiveness. Evaluation can be done in two different ways: implicitly and explicitly. Implicit evaluation takes place during the semester, when learners, by their grades, participation, and motivation, give clues to the teacher on how their learning is going on. Explicit evaluation may take place at the end of the course or after students have experienced it. Using questionnaires, surveys, talks, etc. teachers ask the students to express their attitude towards the subject matter, instructional methods, activities, teacher's role and so on. Evaluation of the course is a brave step for the teacher. He should be open-minded in hearing and implementing learners' comments.

Round Up

As we can see, developing a new course is a difficult, but a very important, process. Before teaching, instructors will need to formulate the goals and objectives of the course, conceptualize the content, select teaching materials, plan the course, and be ready to evaluate it. In the center of the course developing process should a particular group of students the course is designed for.

Course-development as an On-going Process

Developing a new course is not just planning a course. In teaching, instructors are constant learners. With professional experience, our views, teaching concepts, and methodological knowledge are continuously changing. From year to year, we have different students with different needs and background. That will inevitably make it necessary and important to modify every course and adjust it to a particular group of students. Furthermore, quite often in the classroom things take place in an unexpected or unplanned way. Flexible teachers are open to making necessary changes while teaching. They can see what can or should be modified, added, or changed to make the course reflect students' interests and needs. Therefore, course development can be seen as an on-going process.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to introduce a framework for developing a new ESP course. As this article illustrates, course-developing process starts with (1) students analysis, which is followed by (2) formulation of goals and objectives, (3) content, (4) selection of teaching materials, (5) planning the course, and (6) course evaluation. Course development should be viewed as an on-going process, one in which the teacher makes necessary changes to suite students interests and needs, even as the course is in progress.

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