

Developing an “English for Hospitality” Course: Reflections and Suggestions from a Pilot Course

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INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

As tertiary institutions in Japan are striving to stay competitive in an increasingly tougher market, many institutions have taken steps to develop newer academic programs or offer new majors as means to attract prospective students. Subsequently, many English language programs at the university level are being asked to make a transformation by offering language courses or programs that specifically meet the demands of these new initiatives. For teachers, this creates the challenge of developing and teaching a course in which they may or may not have prior experience or knowledge. However, by following a framework that helps to identify and gather information about who, what, where, when, how and why the course is for, the teacher can work towards developing and teaching a course that specifically meets the needs of the students and the objective of a course.

The author of this paper was asked to develop and teach a university level language course particularly focusing on English for the hospitality industry. Drawing upon the experience of developing and teaching the pilot course, the author would like to provide insight into the process of constructing a course with such as focus. This paper will first present a working definition of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and also introduce a framework for designing an ESP course. It will then describe the author’s particular context for designing a course focusing on “Hospitality English”. Finally, the paper will discuss specific challenges while developing and teaching the course and provide suggestions for overcoming these factors.

DEFINING ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES (ESP)

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is a term often contrasted with the term English as a Second Language (ESL). Both are terms which fall under the larger category of English Language Teaching (ELT), however, the main difference between ESP and ESL is to be found in the purpose for learning English. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) views ESP as an *approach* to language learning, which is primarily based on the needs of a learner. They suggest that the foundation of ESP should be based on the question of: ‘Why does this learner need to learn a foreign language?’ (pg.19), thus focusing on the specific purposes and needs that a learner may require. In contrast, the aim of many ESL courses often focuses on all four language skills; reading writing, speaking and listening making such a course comprehensive, or designed to be very general.

Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) present a broader definition of ESP using absolute and variable characteristics (pg.4-5).

1. Absolute characteristics:

- ESP is designed to meet specific needs of the learner;
- ESP makes use of underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves; ESP is centred on the language (grammar, lexis, register), skills, discourse and genres appropriate to these activities.

2. Variable characteristics:

- ESP maybe related to or designed for specific disciplines;
- ESP may use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of general English;
- ESP is likely to be designed for adult learners, either at a tertiary level institution or in a professional work situation. It could, however, be used for learners at secondary school level;
- ESP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students. Most ESP courses assume basic knowledge of the language systems, but it can be used with beginners.

Researchers have classified different ways of describing ESP. The two particular terms of English

for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) can be useful to further explore the concept of ESP. According to Kasper (2000), EAP refers to “courses that focus on developing the overall skills necessary for success in an English-speaking academic environment (pg.10).” Dudley-Evans and St. John (1997) explains that the term EOP refers to “English that is not for academic purposes; it includes professional purposes in administration, medicine, law and business, and vocational purposes for non-professionals in work or pre-work situations (pg.7).” Depending on the focus of a course it may be difficult to categorize it according to the EAP and EOP distinction. This can be especially true for courses which are helping students prepare for a certain field or occupation as a pre-service or pre-experience course. Certain skills or language necessary for achieving course objectives may overlap as students may need both academic and non-academic language and skills upon graduating and becoming employed. Nonetheless, the important aspect to consider here is that they both built around the principle of identifying the needs of a learner and then seeking to develop a course that incorporates both the purpose and the functions for which a language may be required.

Several researchers such as Strevens (1988) (cited in Dudley-Evans and St John (1998)) and Fiorito (2005) have highlighted the advantages of utilizing an ESP-approach to teaching and course development. Strevens expresses the view that ESP can help to focus on learner’s needs, is more relevant to the learner, and is successful in imparting learning. He also implies that an ESP course does not waste time and is more cost-efficient than ‘General English’ courses. Fiorito maintains that ESP can be highly motivating to students because it allows students to apply the subject matter and language they learn in their English classes to their main field of study. He states, “[b]eing able to use the vocabulary and structures they learn in a meaningful context reinforces what is taught and increases their motivation.”

Despite the many advantages of ESP, the task of developing a course with a specific purpose can be daunting, especially if the teacher has little or prior knowledge of that subject matter or that field. The next section will introduce a framework for designing an effective ESP course based on the principle that the word “specific” within ESP depends on properly identifying student needs’ and building a syllabus that focuses on achieving a specific purpose.

A FRAMEWORK FOR DESIGNING AN *ESP* COURSE

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) maintain that, “designing a course is fundamentally a matter of asking questions in order to provide a basis for the subsequent processes of syllabus design, materials writing, classroom teaching and evaluation (pg. 21).” The authors pose a series of questions outlined below as means to gather vital information for designing an ESP course.

Why does the student need to learn?

Who is going to be involved in the process? This will need to cover not just the student but all the people who may have some effect on the process: teachers, sponsors, inspectors, etc.

Where is the learning to take place? What potential does the place provide? What limitations does it impose?

When is the learning to take place? How much time is available? How will it be distributed?

What does the student need to learn? What aspects of language will be needed and how will they be described? What level of proficiency must be achieved? What topic areas will need to be covered?

How will the learning be achieved? What learning theory will underlie the course? What kind of methodology will be employed?

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) further explore these questions by analyzing these aspects under the headings of *Language descriptions*, *Theories of learning*, and *Needs Analysis*. *Figure 1*, “Factors affecting ESP course design” depicts how all three aspects factor into the process of course design.

The authors explain that *language description* refers “the way in which the language system is broken down and described for the purposes of learning (pg.23).” They denote that it is separate

from the way which language is learned or taught. The language identified at varying structural, functional and discoursal levels can be incorporated into the syllabus of an ESP course. *Learning theory* is related to understanding how people learn, providing a theoretical foundation of selecting an approach or method for teaching. By *needs analysis* the authors refer to a complex process of going beyond what learners will have to do with language in a particular situation. They assert that needs analysis should be concerned with both language use and language learning.

The process of *needs analysis* can be further broken down into two different stages of identifying *target needs* and *learner needs*. *Target needs* represent what a learner needs to do in a target situation, whereas *learner needs* can be described as what a learner must do so that he or she can learn. *Target needs* can be further analyzed in terms of *necessities*, *lacks*, and *wants*.

Necessities are the types of needs shaped by what a learner needs to know to be able to function successfully in a target situation. For someone working at the front desk of a hotel, this might mean he or she will need to be able to help a customer with a reservation on the telephone, provide information about the facilities of the hotel to a guest, or write a letter of apology to a guest who was not satisfied with the service. *Necessities* can be identified by observing what kinds of situations they will need to function in and then analyzing the type of language used in these situations. *Lacks* can be ascertained by finding out what the learner already knows so that the course designer can determine which necessities to focus on. By *wants*, the authors refer to what learners desire to learn or achieve from an ESP course. This is based on how learners perceive what their own needs are and what kind of knowledge or skills they may lack. The authors identify this as an important factor in determining course content and objectives. However, in some cases, what the learner desires from a course can sometimes come into conflict with what the instructor views as important in achieving.

Hutchinson and Waters use the analogy of a journey to describe ESP course design. The starting point (*lacks*) and the initial destination (*necessities*) can be determined by the process of target needs analysis by the instructor. The final destination can be negotiated by incorporating the *wants* of the learners. However, the question then becomes how to get from the starting point to the final destination. This involves the process of identifying how and what approach to take—a decision that must be made based on the learning situation, which includes needs, potential, and constraints of the route itself. The authors call this process of incorporating factors involved with learning within all facets of course design, the learning-centred approach. This approach is outlined in figure 2.

Although the context of each individual ESP practitioner can potentially vary significantly, the learning-centred approach to course design can function as an effective place to start this process. Asking and answering questions to gather information of about who, where, when, what, how and why and incorporating the three factors of language descriptions, learning theory and the results of a needs analysis can help guide decisions about the journey that an ESP course is about to embark on. With a starting point, perceived destination and a sharper image of how to go about with the journey, the ESP practitioner can effectively select or develop the appropriate materials for the course and instruct students in ways to target and move towards learning the specific targets and objectives.

CONTEXT OF THE AUTHOR AT ASIA UNIVERISTY

During the year of 2007, the author of this paper was responsible for developing and teaching a course geared towards 3rd year Business Hospitality major students. The following factors were identified and taken into account during course design and instruction:

- The course would be for one year, being divided into two semesters. The class would meet 90-minutes per week.
- The course was intended for 3rd year students majoring in Business Hospitality. The course would be a requirement for these students to graduate. This also meant that the course would have to be designed for pre-service or pre-experience purposes due to the fact that students had yet to fully experience working in the hospitality industry. However, a survey at the beginning of the year revealed that many students had part-time work experience in the hospitality and tourism industry.
- The number of students registered for the class would be limited to approximately 20 to 25

students. The same students would be enrolled in the class for the entire year. Simultaneously, all of the students knew each other fairly well because they had been taking both content and language courses together for the past two years. This would be an advantage in certain kind of activities such as role-play or pair-work. However, with the students knowing each other so well, it was easy for students to quickly deviate from an in-class activity due to the desire to socialize with one another.

- Although students were initially separated into two groups based on language proficiencies, language assessment activities during the first class period indicated there was a noticeable range of abilities in both productive skills of speaking and writing. Students had completed two years of studying foundational ESP courses for Hospitality English. However, none of the students had an opportunity to extensively study abroad. These factors would need to be taken into consideration for selecting or writing course materials.
- The course would need to focus on English specifically needed for working in the hospitality industry or tourism industry.

One of the most critical questions that the author had to begin with in the process of course design was finding out more specifically, “What is meant by the Hospitality industry?” According to Barrows and Bosselman (1999):

“The hospitality and tourism industry includes, multiple segments, all interrelated yet discrete, including lodging, food service, contract services, gaming services, private clubs, meeting planning, theme parks, suppliers, and hospitality education among others. The single factor common to each of these segments is dependence upon the successful provision of service as a means of generating revenue for the bottom line (pg.21).”

This description reveals that the hospitality industry includes a wide range of occupations, job settings, and potential target language situations. If we were to define “What Hospitality English is” based on this particular classification, then it would mean any sort of language being utilized or necessary for functioning in a wide array of occupations or functional settings. This makes it nearly impossible for the teacher to survey, observe and document all aspects of the industry. Nonetheless, one of the major tenants of the hospitality industry is providing service to customers efficiently and effectively. This aspect allowed the author to look for ways to focus the class on customer service and delivery of effective service regardless of the context or situation.

The author did not have any prior experience of working in the hospitality industry or a related field. For any ESP practitioner, the lack of knowledge or expertise in the field could potentially make it difficult to survey, observe, discover, and know what kind language and skills would be necessary for certain occupations in the hospitality industry. Nonetheless, the author relied on personal experience from the perspective of someone receiving service in restaurants, airports, hotels, and travel agencies. In the context of designing and teaching an ESP course for pre-work experience, as in the author’s case, a lack of work experience would not be problematic.

CHALLENGES OF COURSE DESIGN AND TEACHING “ENGLISH FOR HOSPITALITY”

The advantages and disadvantages of utilizing self-generated course materials

A survey administered as means to analyze student needs’ at the beginning of the course revealed that the students within the class had different occupational goals upon graduating from university—ranging from working in a hotel, a restaurant, in the airline industry, a wedding consultancy, a travel agency, catering and banquet services, becoming a tour guide, or an office worker within or out of the hospitality industry. Subsequently, a closer look at each type of occupation showed that each type of position would significantly vary in the type of English language skills, in specific language structures, and in the extent to which English would be necessary on a daily basis. The author of this paper reviewed several different commercially published textbooks, but suitable materials could not be located for this particular class. In some cases, a textbook would focus on a specific occupation or setting such as a hotel or restaurant. At other times, a commercial text would be too general or would be written from the perspective of an individual traveling abroad or being served by others. In other cases, even if the textbook seemed

appropriate in terms of covering a larger range of hospitality occupations and customer service situations, the level and difficulty of the language presented in the text made it unsuitable. Due to the lack of appropriate texts, a decision was made to utilize self-developed or adapted materials. An advantage of using self-generated materials was that language in the text could always be tailored so that it was comprehensible, interesting and also up to date. For example, the author discovered a dialog in print between the ground staff member of an airline and a traveler who was checking in at the ticket counter. During the interaction, the ground staff member asked the traveler whether they wanted a smoking or non-smoking seat. Currently, all commercial flights whether they are international or domestic, prohibit smoking. Rather than presenting such a dialog with an out of date context, the author was able to model a similar type of dialog of checking in at the airport, however focusing more on questions related to security and safety—something more relevant in the post September 11-era of today.

A major disadvantage of utilizing self-developed materials for the ESP course for Hospitality English was that it led to a dearth in activities focusing or utilizing listening. Commercially produced textbooks often come with a video or audio component that can help provide practice for listening or serve to be a model for a dialog in a particular situation. In self-generated materials it would be possible for the instructor to compensate for the lack of an audio CD or tape by modeling a dialog with another student, during class. However, in doing so it becomes difficult to present students with a more natural and fluid form of interaction, especially if the dialog is presented for the first time. The modeling of the dialog becomes more of a process of reading from a script and this makes it difficult for the teacher to simultaneously monitor students in whether they understand or need repetition. Moreover, the process of modeling a dialog “live” during class poses the challenge of replaying or repeating a portion of the dialog for further practice or emphasis. In order to overcome this lack of authentic materials for listening, the teacher could pre-record some of the dialogs with the help of someone else. This would be much preferable approach than simply modeling dialogs “live” during each class. If possible, the instructor should make a conscious effort to include wider variety of English speakers due to the need of students majoring in the field to be familiar with international multi-national forms of English.

Considerations for utilizing dialogs and role-play in class

The author made a decision in the early stages of course design that students should have many opportunities to practice dialogs and simulate situations involving a customer and that of a person providing the service. This resulted in the frequent use of paired dialog practice and role-play activities, which required students to deviate from or generate an impromptu response to the script during the class.

One problem of role-playing in the classroom was that the teacher was limited in the ability to recreate or simulate an authentic interaction between a customer and employee. Unlike vocational schools for the hospitality industry, Asia University does not require students to wear uniforms, nor does it have the physical facilities resembling a hotel front desk or airline counter. Therefore, it was important to raise consciousness before the role-playing activity, outlining the occupation roles as well as what the purpose of the dialog was. Furthermore, by bringing in small props (such as name badges with an insignia of a fictitious company, or printed materials resembling an airline boarding pass), picture images of the potential setting and characters of the role-play conversation, this could help or motivate students to actively engage in the role-play or paired dialog.

As means to assist in the process of assessing students, the author would like to recommend that teachers assess their students by video or audio recording the dialog or role-play. Students take the performance much more seriously, as they make a conscious effort to practice before the performance and do well during the performance. Another advantage of recording the interaction is that the teacher can go back and review it to identify problem areas or finding areas to give students’ positive feedback. The instructor can also ask students to self-review the recording to look for successful or problematic areas within the interaction.

One problem of videotaping or recording by audio tape is that it must be set up prior to class and more significantly, it takes time to record each pair of group of students. The author would like to suggest that students are given some other concurrent activity or task to work on while waiting or to be recorded. Once students have been recorded and perceive they are “off the hook” in terms of

being assessed, they often will start chatting or wander in terms of their attention. In order to prevent this type of situation, students should be given an in-class assignment or activity in which they will be required to hand in or be held accountable for at the end of the class. While students wait to be recorded or assessed, they can work on a related task, thereby maximizing class time.

SUMMARY

In conclusion, for those developing ESP courses, utilizing a learning centred approach can help practitioners effectively design and teach a course that will meet the specific needs of their students. The process should first begin by conducting a needs analysis to identify the target situation, which involves plotting a starting point and destination in terms of both language and skill areas. Next, the learning needs of the students' that the teacher is specifically working with, must be surveyed to help the course developer determine how the specific goals are going to be met and how to go about teaching the course. Integrating the results of the needs analysis, the language descriptors, and learning theory will enable the course to be "specific" in terms of focus for a "specific" group of students. Each specific context and factors involved will mean each individual ESP practitioner will need to embark on a distinct "journey" for course development. A framework such as the learning centred approach can help "guide" individuals through the process of designing and teaching an ESP course. In this paper, the development a "Hospitality English" course was specifically highlighted to present the particular challenges in the author's context. Any specific type of future research to clearly identify and delineate specific English phrases, dialogs, and vocabulary that is common to any service industry workers would help not only to draw attention to addressing the needs and challenges of ESP courses focusing on hospitality but to the overall field of ESP as well.

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Figure 1: Factors Affecting ESP Course Design (from Hutchinson and Waters: 1987; pg. 22)

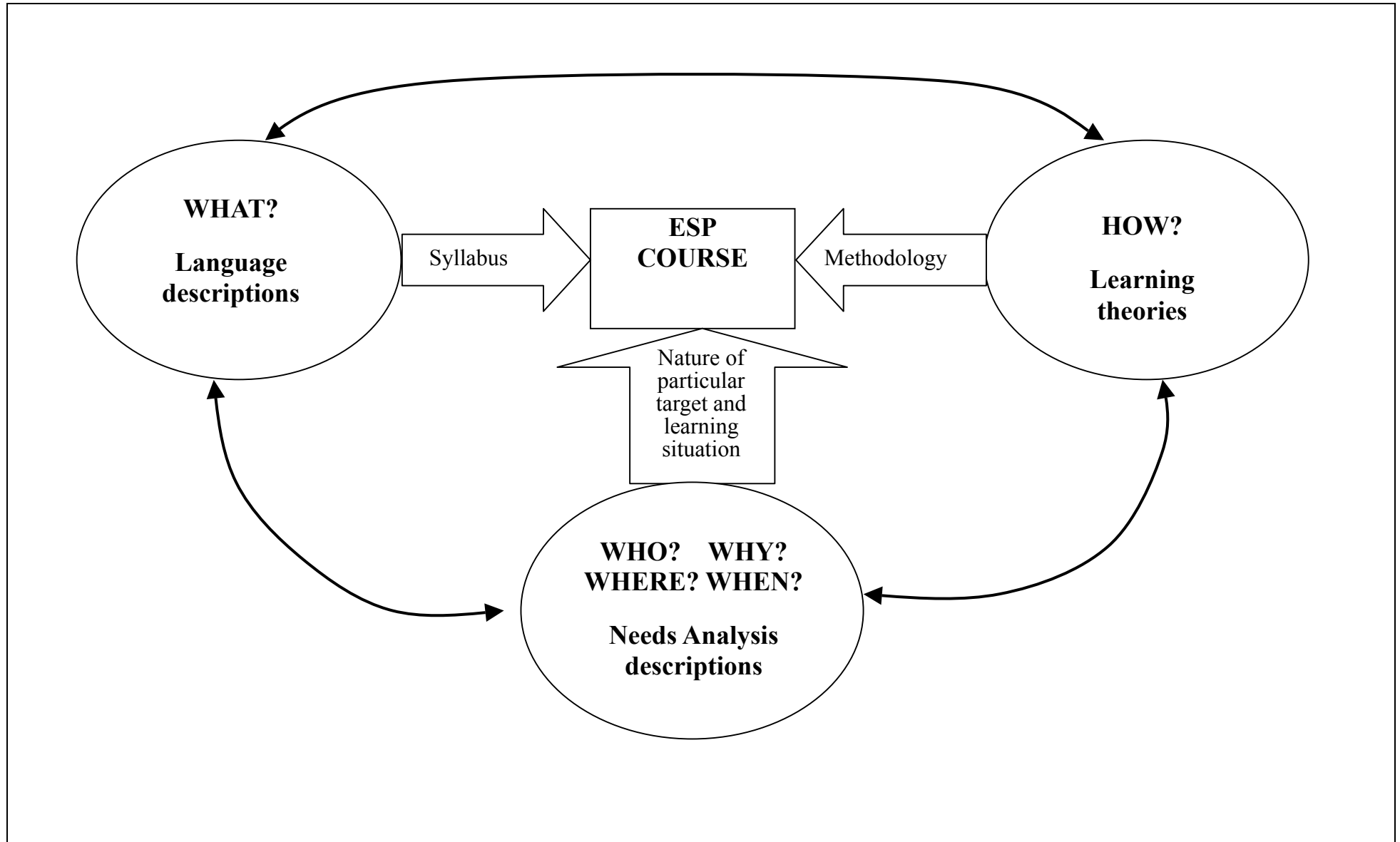


Figure 2 “The learner-centred approach to course design”
 (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987: pg. 74)

