ESP classes in life-long learning contexts: a case study of a mixed-abilities group

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***Abstract**: The main objective of ESP classes in life-long learning programs has been to offer the best support for learners to become expert members of their professional and discourse communities. But the success of this endeavor depends often on finding the best local solution. This paper presents a case-study of an ESP course designed and taught within a life-long learning program in the field of green energy technologies implementation. The learners were in-service adults, engineering graduates, with mixed-abilities in English. I argue that relevant materials, custom tailored for the needs of the given teaching/learning situation, a constant evaluation of needs and progress of learners, and a commitment to offering multiple learning opportunities for both beginner and advanced students can insure the success of and ESP course in the most difficult contexts.*
Keywords: ESP, course design, mixed-abilities groups, life-long learning programs

Introduction

ESP classes are targeted towards adult learners, a fact which makes ESP a component of life-long learning programs (LLLP) in many professional fields. Postgraduate development programs, postdoctoral studies, professional freshen-up courses, etc. include language (brush-up) classes with an applied character, trying to equip pre-service or in-service professionals with as many and as relevant skills as possible for a better insertion on the labour market. Due to this wide variety of contexts in which they are taught, and to the diversity of target students, ESP classes are highly situation dependent and require precise needs analysis (Paltridge & Starfield, 2013). The final objective of ESP classes in life-long learning programs has been to offer the best support for learners to become expert members of their professional and discourse communities.

Designing a curriculum to answer the needs of ESP learners and fulfilling the set objectives pose a series of challenges, often very different form those encountered in general language course design and teaching (Paltridge & Starfield, 2013 for a comprehensive review). Even where there is a clear picture of the 'what and how' (Basturkmen, 2006) to teach in a particular course, some of these challenges make very difficult the task of fulfilling the identified needs. For instance, ESP courses in adult learning compete in time and effort resources with specialist content courses or with working hours of learners who are often employed full-time or part-time and have to work and study in the same time. Another problem is the level of language competence of learners who enter ESP courses. Mixed-abilities groups are frequent. Learners come with various initial language learning experiences, for some dating back a short while before enrolling in the ESP course, for other with gaps of months and years from their last English language lesson or opportunity to use the language. This situation leads course

developers to accommodate classes for refreshing knowledge and regaining a level of fluency before teaching specific purposes language content.

The present paper presents a case study of an ESP course which was part of a long-life learning program implemented by the Technical University of Cluj-Napoca, Romania under a European Social Fund program. The program was targeted at university graduates from a nearby small town, working in local public institutions such as the Local Council, the Mayor's office, schools and the Environmental Protection Agency. The aim was to provide up-to-date information and training in green technologies that could be implemented in public institutions for energy conservation and sustainable development. The ESP course was meant to familiarize the course participants with vocabulary and structures specific to describing and implementing environmentally friendly technologies and energy conservation.

Context and challenges

The Department of Modern Languages, Technical University of Cluj, Romania, was assign to design and teach this 42-hour module of English. Content-wise, the course required a rather narrow angle approach (Basturkmen, 2010), in that it had to focus on topics from green energy-production technology, energy conservation and sustainable development. The students were university graduates with English language competencies ranging from A2 level to B2 level[1]. Moreover, some of them rarely used English after they graduated, in some cases 10 years before. None of the students had ever had any training in ESP. At the end of the course students had to undergo a form of evaluation to show progress in English language use at work, in contexts related to the subject of the program.

Needs analysis and course design

As with all course design, the needs analysis preceded all decisions regarding what kind of tasks and skills the course should build. Employing a short online questionnaire, I found that the learners came from various work backgrounds, some were already in the decision-making layer of local institutions, some were at the beginning of their careers. They worked in different institutions and only came together and met for the first time in the program that offered the ESP course. The teaching staff had to commute from Cluj, where the University is, to their town, a distance of about 200km.

Due to these situational challenges, the needs analysis was driven by close consideration of the target situation of our learners and by trying to match the general objectives of the program with the specific skills targeted by the ESP course. I established that one of the priorities of the program was to help decision makers make informed decisions on what kind and how green technologies can be purchases, implemented and exploited in public service to insure sustainable local environmental protection and energy conservation and

[1] The Common European Reference Framework for Languages level descriptors.

that an ESP course could contribute to achieving this objective by developing and improving reading and speaking skills.

More specifically, I decided to focus on:

- reading for gist,
- reading for specific information,
- identifying specific language functions in informative texts, such as definitions, classifications, comparison and contrast, process and procedure;
- acquiring specific technical vocabulary;
- extracting specific information from a short informative text and
- presenting (orally) specific data from short informative texts.

Gathering documentation from authentic sources on topics related to green technologies for energy production and sustainable local development, I designed reading and speaking tasks to involve both the learners with a lower level of competence in English and the more advanced ones. Short texts were selected to fulfill the criteria of suitability for the learner's interest and exploitability. For instance, to introduce items of relevant vocabulary the definition and tasks in Fig. 1 were selected. The diagram completion task was accessible even for the beginner learners.

1. What do you think *green buildings* are? Read the following definition and compare it to your answer:

> A **green building** is a structure (a building) built and exploited throughout its lifecycle in such a way that is *environmentally responsible* and *resource-efficient*; for a building to be totally green, these principles apply from design, construction, operation, maintenance, renovation, and demolition.

2. Fill in this diagram with the steps of the lifecycle of a building as presented in the definition:

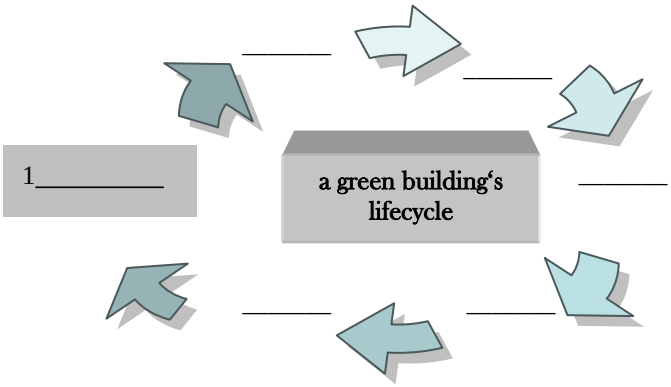

Figure 1. Sample tasks with open end and diagram completion.

Discussion

With mixed-abilities groups, a frequently employed strategy is to supply open-ended tasks so that each student can complete them according to their level (Balteiro, 2007). I adopted the same strategy and coupled it with group and pair work, so that students could help each other, correct their peers and seek help from those with better English language skills. I found that adults, especially older ones in higher decision making positions in their professional careers, find it more embarrassing to ask for clarification from the teacher that from their own learning colleagues.

Grouping language students according to their level, so that beginners sit with other beginners and solve only lower level tasks is common practice when working with mixed abilities groups. While advantages are obvious, including the fact that students may feel less ashamed of their performance in a group of learners with the same level, in the case presented here it did not turn out to be the best solution. In the pre-teaching discussion I had with the course participants I quickly found out that some of them seemed plainly threatened by the fact that they have to take part in an ESP class when their English was poor or 'rusty' as one participant put it. More threatening seemed the situation in which they would have to ask the teacher to repeat something they did not understand or to ask the teacher to translate words other learners understood. Participants with a higher position in their careers confessed it felt like admitting in front of their competitors that they do not know how to run their business! It turned out during our discussion that much less threatening was to resolve these potentially embarrassing situations with their peer learners and appeal to the teacher's help only for the new content being taught. This was the reason why I grouped beginner students with more advanced ones and told them they can learn a lot from each other. I soon saw the benefits, as beginners relaxed and the more advanced students played a 'paternal' role in providing explanation whenever something more complex came up and actually creating for themselves opportunities for practicing and putting to test their own knowledge.

With this strategy I managed to establish a comfortable environment and encouraged peer collaboration; in practice, I achieved even more, as learners became aware of the variety of learning opportunities offered not only by teachers but also by peers. Collaborative learning became a path for autonomy; the beginner learners understood better their immediate needs and learned to approach a task with the confidence that they can solve it according to their level, that they can see the same task being solved differently by their more advanced peers and thus they can benefit from multiple sources of language input (teacher and peers). The more advanced students tested their own knowledge and practiced by playing the teacher role for the beginners, but, in the same time, could solve open-ended tasks according to their own level and benefit from the teacher's feedback.

The other challenge for both teachers and learners was the evaluation. The syllabus required a final evaluation for learners express in a grade according to the Romanian system of formal evaluation in education from 1 to 10, with 1 being the lowest grade, 10 the highest and 5 or higher considered a passing grade.

Although initially I intended to have a written test in the form of multiple-choice questions, I eventually changed my mind, in the light of the data about the mixed-abilities learners and the success of collaborative learning and task solving. The evaluation took the form of group work on a open-ended project presentation. Because I had to make sure all learners understood the task, the input for the project work was extensive. Three Greenbuilding Award winning programs[2] were selected and essential data about each were offered in a table format. Working in (mixed-abilities) groups, the students were required to study the data, prepare and present a poster to compare the three projects by:

- stating the aim and end-result of each program;
- stating the main areas of intervention of each program;
- representing quantitative information by drawing a graph/table and presenting the data;
- deciding which was the best in their opinion and motivating their choice.

All students managed to tackle the evaluation tasks. As input information was synthetic and supplemented with values and quantitative data, the beginners could easily identify the aim of each program, the practical results – such as fuel/energy consumption decrease – and display these in a line/bar graph or tables. Based on the information they extracted, they could also decide which was the best program in terms of successfully implementing the new technologies. However, motivating their choice in detail, with supporting data, was too difficult. This part of the presentation was taken over by the more advanced students who were able not only to identify and extract relevant information from the input text, but also to interpret and present it comparatively. All presentations got passing grades, from7 to 10.

Conclusion

I felt that, following Prabhu (1990), the best way to design and teach an ESP course would be to find the **appropriate local solution**.

The course presented here posed several challenges from the very beginning:

- a limited small number of hours, offered in a modular form over a period of three weeks;
- course designers did not have the possibility to conduct extensive needs analysis, having only a general profile of the prospective learners to start from;
- learners were of mixed abilities, with no previous ESP training;
- the course objectives had to match the LLL program in which the learners were engaged;
- grade-based evaluation had to measure learners' progress.

[2] See the Appendix for tasks and input information for one of the three cases they had to study.

The needs analysis conducted before deciding on a syllabus and materials to be used consisted in analyzing the professional background of the learners, their previous language learning experience and present language skills. The aims and context of the program which offered the ESP course was decisive as to which specialized content materials had to target and which skills and tasks should be included. Due to this unique combination of situational factors and learner needs, in-house materials and tasks were developed. Focus was placed on acquiring relevant vocabulary and reading and speaking skills.

All through the teaching sessions, as well as for the evaluation session students were placed in mixed abilities groups due to their availability to learning from peers and to the fact that beginners felt sometimes more comfortable requesting clarification from their more advanced colleagues. Many tasks were re-designed to suit this arrangement and to allow every student solve them according to their level.

In ESP teaching, situational factors and learner level of language competence are always the first pillars on which a course is designed and conducted. Success, however, depends also on other factors. In the case described in this paper, although beginners were able to benefit substantially, their general level of English did not improve significantly. As the evaluation proved, they managed to enlarge their vocabulary, to acquire specialized terminology in green technologies implementation and management, and improved reading for specific information. The more advanced students were the ones who fully benefited from the ESP course we offered. All stake holders (program managers, the course planner and teacher, the learners involved) were fully aware of this shortcoming. Decision making in planning and delivering ESP courses is never easy. Ideally, each learner should be addressed with individualized tasks and materials, so everybody should get the most of a learning session; in practice this is almost impossible. As this paper recounted, solutions are appropriate if they address the particularities of the learners and the learning situation. The implementation of a given package of ESP content is in fact and on-going process of adaptation and negotiation of materials and teaching methods based on learners' feedback. The local solution implemented in this case may not fit other teaching and learning ESP situations, but it can offer insight into the difficulties encountered by practitioners and learners.

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Appendix

Project work

Work in small groups. Study the projects that won the *EU Greenbuilding Award* in 2010. Compare the information and then try to decide which **you** believe is the best. Also, draw graphs or tables to show and compare any quantitative information available. After analyzing your information prepare a poster presentation to tell the class:

What were the projects about?
What was the aim of each?
What interventions were made?
What were the results of the interventions?
Which seemed to undergo the most dramatic change? Why?
Which is the best in your opinion and why?

Case 1

ASILO –Cologno Monzese – Italy, EU Greenbuilding Award 2010

Description of the building

Type: a new building, unconventional architectural shape, very attractive, curved roof surfaces;
Function: kindergarten for about sixty children and civic centre for social and cultural activities for families;
Aim of intervention: to create a building with functional internal and external spaces (classrooms, multifunctional spaces, gardens, etc.) and an interesting aspect for children and family of the community.

Energy indices	*Saving in total primary energy (without renewables): 55 %* *Saving in total primary energy (including renewables): 77 %*
Energy savings	*Primary energy for heating is 81% lower than Italian building code* *Primary energy for cooling is 21 % lower than typical cooling configuration in Italy (there was no legal values for cooling in Italy).*
Building envelope	*High thermal insulation level* *External walls –20 cm insulation; roof, walls insulation; high performance windows*
Building services	*Ground water heat pump for heating and sanitary hot water* *Free cooling with ground water heat exchanger* *Mechanical ventilation with heat recovery* *Night time ventilation/cooling in summer*
Renewable energy	*Photovoltaic panels(110 m²) grid connected* *3,9 kWh/m³a (primary energy equivalent)*
Other measures	*Natural ventilation through skylight* *Use of daylight and energy efficient lighting (i.e. skylight)* *Solar protection by building shape, orientation and trees*

Project developed by Politecnico di Milano

About the author

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