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A WISH LIST FOR ESP COURSE DESIGN

Abstract: *Thanks to the internet, it's fairly easy now to put together a half-decent ESP course. But is it possible to do much better? Using examples from Cambridge English for …, a new series of short ESP courses, I will show how a principled but flexible approach to ESP can lead to courses really targeted towards the day-to-day needs of professionals.*

Key words: *ESP, course design, syllabus, skills, needs analysis, targeted, professionals, wish list, quick and easy*

1 Introduction

As busy ESP teachers, we all know that creating 'home-made' ESP materials is extremely time-consuming and tiring. Therefore it is understandable that we should choose quick and easy (Q&E) approaches as much as possible. However, Q&E techniques by themselves are not enough to make a solid, useful course that is targeted to our learners' needs. We therefore need to be aware of a range of more difficult and time-consuming techniques for making our courses much more effective. For this reason, I have collected a range of techniques that should be on every ESP teacher's wish list (WL): things that we would love to do if we had more time and resources available to us. These are all techniques that have been central to the published course books that I have worked on, especially the *Cambridge English for …* series of short ESP courses, which I edit.

The aim of this paper is not to stop teachers from using the Q&E techniques, but rather to raise awareness of what is possible, and to suggest some practical ways of implementing these WL techniques in the ESP courses we create.

I will organise this paper around the nine key elements of ESP course design: the four skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking), the four language areas (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and functions) and, at the heart of course design, the needs analysis. Each

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section is divided into three parts: Q&E (quick and easy) techniques, WL (wish list) techniques and ideas for moving from the wish list to reality.

2 Needs analysis

2.1 Q&E: The easiest way of conducting a needs analysis is through introspection: the teacher asks him/herself what the learners might need. I have seen this technique used many times, but the outcome is almost always a very poorly designed course. Slightly more demanding and useful is the technique of conducting research, such as reading about the ESP topic on the internet, in libraries, etc.. Again, while this is a valuable technique, it is not enough to create a useful course.

The obvious solution is to conduct a needs analysis, not only by interviewing our learners (or future learners) but also a wide range of other stakeholders, such as our learners' employers, their customers, their business partners, etc.. Very often, the person paying for the course has very different needs and expectations from the learners, and we need to take these into consideration.

2.2 WL: In an ideal world, we would interview as many people as possible: subject specialists from university departments, professionals from the relevant field of industry, other teachers who have more experience of teaching this particular ESP subject, etc.. This is what happens with published course books: researchers spend weeks interviewing subject experts to find out what the typical needs are in that field. Ideally, we would also become subject experts ourselves.

2.3 From wish list to reality: Although we may not be able to spend weeks interviewing dozens of experts, we can at least try to interview a range of stakeholders, including any subject specialists and experienced teachers we can find. We need to focus not only on their *needs* (i.e. what they have to do in their professional lives), but also on their *wants* (i.e. what will motivate them to learn and keep them interested) and their *lacks* (i.e. things that they are currently unable to do). The needs analysis should focus on target situations and the corresponding skills, functions and language that are necessary for those situations.

It is also important to remember that the needs analysis is an on-going process: we can continue to learn much about our learners during and after the course. Therefore it is vital to

keep asking questions (e.g. Does this role-play feel like the sort of thing you would do in your job? How could I make it more realistic?) and amending the course structure as the course is progressing, and certainly before you run the course again with different learners.

Finally, the best way to become an expert yourself is to learn *actively* from your learners. Make notes of useful information they are able to provide during lessons (e.g. a translation that they provide, an important difference between the way things are presented in a text and the way the same process works in their country, etc.) and try to learn this before you teach the course again. Make notes of language and topics that cause difficulty during lessons, and then carry out research on that language/topic before the next lesson. For example, you could make a note of 20 difficult vocabulary items that cause problems during the lesson. At home, create a matching activity with online definitions. In the next lesson, give the learners the words and definitions on slips of paper so that they can have a matching race in teams.

3 Reading

3.1 Q&E: This is one of the easiest and most common techniques used by ESP teachers: find an article on the internet that is related to your learners' work. Create pre-reading tasks (e.g. a personalisation discussion on the topic; a prediction activity), while-reading tasks (e.g. read to check your predictions, comprehension questions) and post-reading tasks (e.g. matching vocabulary to definitions, finding collocations). These can then be followed by analysis and exercises of any useful grammar from the text, and some sort of follow-up (e.g. a discussion, a role-play, a writing task). Most teachers can create such lessons very quickly and easily, and it is perfectly possible to build a whole course around this method. Unfortunately, such a course would be seriously flawed and not especially useful for learners.

3.2 WL: Much more useful would be to find out what types of documents and texts your learners really need to read in their professional lives (e.g. company reports, contracts), and especially which ones cause them problems. This information can only come from a needs analysis. In other words, we should provide reading practice *for* their work, and not just *about* their work or even *loosely connected with* their work. Very few professionals regularly need to read magazine articles in English as part of their jobs, for example.

In addition, we can use reading exercises as a springboard for teaching writing skills: the reading text can serve as a model for a writing task. Therefore we can also research the types

of documents that our learners will need to write in their professional lives, and again, focus especially on the ones that cause them problems.

3.3 From wish list to reality: The most important advice is to collect pieces of authentic correspondence and professional writing from your learners' field, and *not just articles about their field*. Examples include emails, reports, technical correspondence, contracts, etc.. Sometimes it is possible to find a gold-mine of such authentic documents, e.g. there is an incredible bank of authentic contracts available at the site http://www.onecle.com/. If you teach experienced professionals, you can also keep your former learners' writing tasks. You can then correct the English in such texts, and use them as examples of authentic writing with later learners.

4 Writing

4.1 Q&E: One of the easiest techniques I've used when teaching working professionals is to collect and correct their own authentic writing. In other words, whenever they write something at work in English, I ask them to remove any confidential information and to send me a copy, which I can then correct. I've also used such authentic writing to identify the learners' specific weaknesses and to create tailored materials to remedy these problems.

We can also create generic writing tasks very easily, for example by taking ideas from course books or practice tests and past papers (e.g. for the BEC exams). These will certainly be good for giving writing practice, and in some ways, that is all that matters. Each learner should push himself/herself to write to the best of his/her abilities, in terms of accuracy, sophistication, etc.. We can correct their English, and provide guidance on how to improve, but ultimately it is the experience of writing itself, rather than being corrected, that is most useful. It gives learners the chance to experiment with new language and structures in a controlled, safe environment, and to focus on their own needs and experiences in the piece that they write.

In addition to providing practice, we also need to work systematically on the skills required to write effectively in English: things like coherence and cohesion, discourse markers, paragraphing, reference devices, punctuation and spelling, levels of formality, style, etc.. If writing is a priority to our learners, we can include work on each of these areas in the courses we design.

4.2 WL: In addition to these generic tasks and generic skills, we should try to identify job-specific writing tasks, i.e. things that our learners will need to write in their day-to-day work. Very few professionals have to write essays for their jobs, but they may need to use similar skills when writing, for example, a marketing plan (see Robinson, 2010), a scientific paper (see Armer, 2011), a contract (see Krois-Lindner and Translegal, 2011) or an HR competence framework (see Sandford, 2011). Therefore, we need to provide the skills they need to write such documents, as well as opportunities to practice these skills in both controlled exercises and extended writing activities.

Again, these skills may include the generic writing skills included in 4.1 above, but each type of document may have its own set of sub-skills. For example, when writing a contract, it is useful to use diagrams or mind maps to clarify the relationships between concepts before we start to write (Day, 2011). When writing technical correspondence, we may need to use a large number of performative verbs, e.g. We confirm that …, We note that …, We propose that … (see *English360 for Engineering*).

4.3 From wish list to reality: As with reading, we need to identify texts and documents that our learners will have to write in their professional lives, and especially the ones which are likely to cause them problems. We need to find good models of such texts and documents in order to carry out thorough analyses of the language and techniques that they use, and then provide plenty of controlled and free practice. Feedback and correction are, of course, very important and useful, but we should also remember that the main value from writing comes from the process of planning and writing itself, not from being corrected.

5 Listening

5.1 Q&E: In most ESP courses until recently, the main way learners could get listening practice was through the technique of SLTSE (Students Listen to the Teacher Speaking English). In other words, because it was difficult to create listening materials, these were often left out of ESP courses. The only alternative was to use recordings from existing course books or practice tests and past exam papers (e.g. BEC exams). These have the benefit of being created especially for learners. In addition, usually the tasks are well designed and allow teachers to monitor learners' abilities very accurately. If nothing else, they provide learners with exposure to a range of voices and accents, not just the teacher's. But they suffer from the

disadvantage of being inauthentic, de-contextualised and usually not relevant to our learners' field of interest.

The situation has improved somewhat with the growth of the internet and especially the ease with which teachers can find videos (e.g. on YouTube) and play them in class (e.g. on interactive whiteboards). It is now very easy to find video materials that are somehow connected with our learners' working lives, but much harder to find materials that are really relevant to their needs.

With this in mind, it is worth taking some time to explore our aims when we use listening or video materials in class.

1. The most obvious aim is simply to provide listening practice, based on the (sensible) assumption that the best way to improve listening skills is to get plenty of practice.
2. However, we can also try to be more systematic and to focus on listening sub-skills. For example, we can develop sub-skills for *top-down processing* (i.e. understanding the text by knowing what it is generally about, and using that knowledge to work out the meaning of smaller items like sentences and individual words) by including lots of activities that involve prediction, contextualisation and gist listening. We can develop sub-skills for *bottom-up processing* (i.e. using our understanding of sounds and individual words to make sense of larger units of language such as sentences and whole texts) by including lots of work on vocabulary and tightly controlled gap-filling or dictation tasks. We can develop *communication strategies* to help real-life listening by teaching language and techniques for dealing with communication breakdowns, asking for and providing clarification, active listening skills, etc. (see Allum and McGarr, 2010).
3. Finally, we can use listening activities to provide input for speaking, i.e. models of professionals using the language in real-life situations in which our learners could well find themselves in their future working lives. The learners will not only need to be able to understand what is being said in such situations; they will also need to engage in such conversations.

5.2 **WL:** When I was working on the books in the *Cambridge English for …* series, I prioritised the third of these aims, and included as many situational dialogues as possible. The rationale for doing so was that although aims 1 and 2 can be met by using generic listening

materials, whether from course books or sites like YouTube, the third aim can only be met by creating or finding situational dialogues, i.e. dialogues where professionals are interacting exactly as our learners will need to in their professional careers. And these are precisely the most difficult part of an ESP course for a teacher to create.

This meant researching such situations thoroughly, then writing the dialogues, and finally recording them professionally with actors. There were also, of course, many stages in-between, where the dialogues were amended and edited.

Such an approach is clearly difficult for teachers to follow in their home-made courses, but not impossible. For example, the research is an important part of the needs analysis, as discussed above. It is surprisingly quick to write dialogues. The thing that takes the time is to check and edit them both for accuracy of language and for the realism and usefulness of the situation. For the first problem, non-native teachers of English could consider asking native speaker colleagues to check the dialogues and suggest changes. For the second problem, colleagues or working professionals can advise you on how to make them more natural and relevant.

Professional recording by actors is obviously impossible and unrealistic for most teaching situations, but there are two ways of approximating this. Firstly, you could ask your friends and colleagues to record the dialogues for you, either on an audio recorder or a video recorder. Secondly, you could input the dialogues into a site such as Xtranormal (www.xtranormal.com), which allows you to create animated movies of your dialogues.

This process of researching, writing and recording situational dialogues may seem like a lot of unnecessary work, but if you are to teach the same course several times, it becomes more feasible. This also provides you with the chance to check how useful your dialogues are for learners, and to amend them if necessary.

5.3 From wish list to reality: You can also find situational dialogues on sites such as YouTube (www.youtube.com). For example, if you are teaching nurses, you may find clips from a medical drama set in a hospital. If you are teaching engineers, you may find clips of engineers explaining how something works to non-specialists (see *English360 for Engineering*). If you are teaching future media professionals, you may find a fly-on-the-wall

documentary set in a newspaper office (see Ceramella and Lee, 2008). Such clips are obviously less easy to find than generic clips, but it is well worth hunting for them.

Once you have found them, ideally you will need to transcribe them in order to analyse the language. This is obviously very frustrating and time-consuming, so it may be possible simply to make notes of useful language and techniques as you watch. The key is to focus not just on vocabulary but also on broader issues and skills that will help your learners when they find themselves in the same situation.

The listening lesson will then have several elements: an introduction to focus on top-down skills (contextualisation, personalisation, prediction); a first listening task focusing on the sub-skill of gist listening; a second listening task to focus on details, including some key vocabulary; language analysis and practice as preparation for speaking; and a follow-up such as a role-play where learners re-enact a similar situation to the one in the clip.

6 Speaking

6.1 Q&E: It is very easy to allow spontaneous discussions to develop during lessons, and in many ways, this is a valuable use of class time: learners are engaging with the topic and making an effort to relate to it and to speak naturally. They are also pushing themselves to use relevant language. Of course, it is important to guide the discussion, especially if it deviates from the main aim of your lesson. The teacher should also monitor carefully for language, to correct mistakes as appropriate, to supply missing vocabulary, to suggest alternative ways of expressing things, to praise good uses of language and to encourage all learners to participate fully.

Such discussions could be personalisation tasks, either at the beginning of lessons (e.g. "What have you been doing this week at work / in your studies?") or as part of the main body of the lesson. Such discussions are valuable for generating interest in the topic, for personalising it and therefore increasing motivation, and for predicting the contents of reading or listening texts. As a follow-up, discussions again allow learners to relate the topic to their own lives, which again makes the lesson more memorable, motivating and effective.

6.2 **WL:** Although discussions are valuable, they are not enough. We also need to provide as much practice as we can of real-life situations where our learners will need to speak English. In other words, role-plays and simulations.

As always, this depends on what you learnt during the needs analysis:

- In what situations will your learners need to speak English?
- Where will they be?
- Who will they be interacting with?
- What problems might they have?

Once we have identified the target situations, we need to identify, teach and practise (in controlled exercises) the necessary language and skills for those situations. Finally, we can create role-plays to provide freer practice of those situations.

6.3 **From wish-list to reality:** In a classical role-play, the course writer creates role-cards for the learners. However, it is possible to hand this responsibility over to your learners. As long as you are clear about the basic situation (as established by your needs analysis and your lesson aims), you can elicit details from the learners themselves and write them on the board. For example:

- Who are the two people in this dialogue?
- Who do they work for?
- What exactly does this company/organisation do?
- What challenges is this company/organisation facing?
- Which country/countries do they come from?
- What problem are they trying to solve? Why?
- What are their motivations (i.e. what do they personally want from this dialogue)?

The answers to all of these questions can be elicited from the learners. All you need to do is establish a procedure for the meeting and a time limit and monitor while the role-plays are taking place.

7 Grammar

7.1 Q&E: The simplest approach to grammar in ESP teaching is simply to correct our learners' written and spoken errors. In short ESP courses, this may be sufficient: our learners can be expected to receive grammar training from other English courses during their lives, which means we can concentrate on professional skills which are not covered elsewhere.

If our course is also their main English course, however, we will need to build a grammar syllabus into our course. We could do this simply by using a grammar book (e.g. Active Grammar) in conjunction with our main course. Alternatively, we could create our own grammar worksheets, which can be used with a wide range of ESP subjects that we teach.

7.2 WL: It is worth noting that many published ESP course books do not include a traditional grammar syllabus. The reason for this is that such books are intended to be used by a very wide range of levels and nationalities, and such learners will have a wide range of grammar needs. Therefore, the assumption is made that teachers will have to add their own traditional grammar syllabuses to the course.

One approach to grammar and ESP is to start with a grammar syllabus, and then identify contexts in which to present and practise each grammar point. For example, in order to practise present perfect simple for experiences, a course might use the context of job interviews (e.g. "Have you ever worked with children?"). While this approach may be good for teaching grammar, it is not a good way of teaching skills such as job interview techniques. When you analyse typical job interview questions and answers, it becomes clear that such questions with present perfect are not at all common.

A more satisfactory approach starts from the target situations (e.g. dealing with difficult questions at a job interview), which then generate their own grammar syllabus. For example, one good way of dealing with the interview question, "Tell me about your weaknesses", is to use *can* in your answer: "I can be a little impatient when I am focused on a task and waiting for others", where *can* has the effect of turning the weakness from a permanent personality flaw into a habit (Downes, 2008).

Another example of such task-specific grammar comes from marketing language: the importance of using short sentences with human subjects (Robinson, 2008). This contrasts with the typical written language used by lawyers and scientists, where there is a preference

for longer sentences and various grammatical devices to avoid human subjects (Krois-Lindner and Translegal, 2011; Armer, 2011).

7.3 From wish list to reality: Between these two extremes, grammar-driven syllabuses and situation-based syllabuses, there is a middle ground, where a whole grammar syllabus is mapped onto an existing situation-based syllabus, using the situations to provide a context for the sentences in the grammar presentation and practice activities. This is the approach that I used when creating a grammar syllabus for the course *English360 for Engineering* (http://engineering.english360.com/). For example, one unit of the main course (Ibbotson, 2008) focused on written notices and safety warnings, including one warning "Under no circumstances should anyone be able to access them". There was no specific investigation or practice of the grammatical structure in question (inversion) in the main course; instead, the focus remained on creating warning notices and emphasising the importance of safety precautions, which was the main aim of the unit. However, when I came to add the grammar syllabus, I used this sentence as my starting point, and added a full presentation and set of practice exercises on inversion, in the context of safety warnings. The advantage of such an approach is that once the grammar syllabus has been written, it can be adapted over and over again to fit the context of whichever course you are working on.

8 Vocabulary

8.1 Q&E: If your ESP syllabus is dominated by reading texts from the internet and listening/video scripts, it is very easy to take vocabulary from these texts and create a range of activities to teach their meaning and practise them. Examples include many types of matching exercise (e.g. words with definitions, split collocations), gap-fills (e.g. target words, dependent prepositions, etc.), sorting activities, find-a-word-which-means activities, etc.. As usual, this is a useful approach, as the language is first presented in an authentic context. However, it is not a very systematic approach to learning subject-specific vocabulary.

8.2 WL: For this reason, it is essential to have a word-list of target items, which ideally should be graded for language level and priority for learners: you need to find a balance between the words the learners already know and the words that are so rare that the learners may never come across them again. In order to create a word list, you need specialised knowledge or the support of an expert in the field. This is obviously rather problematic for ESP teachers.

8.3 From wish list to reality: A good starting point is a specialised dictionary. There are over a thousand such online dictionaries listed on OneLook (http://www.onelook.com/?d=all_&v=&sort=&langdf=all). It may seem a daunting task to teach a whole dictionary, but once the already-known and rare words are removed, the task becomes more manageable. If you teach 20 new words per week, you can cover several hundred over an academic year. It is important to focus not only on the meanings of the words, but also the way they are used (i.e. the grammatical patterns associated with them, dependent prepositions, etc.) and pronounced. Most specialised dictionaries do not provide pronunciation, so you may need to conduct a general search on OneLook (http://www.onelook.com/), which should generate all the information you need.

We should also include in our course some learner training on how to learn vocabulary (e.g. memorisation techniques, recycling techniques, systematic use of vocabulary banks, etc.).

9 Pronunciation

9.1 Q&E: As with grammar, the simplest technique is to correct learners' spoken errors. We should also always provide pronunciation guidance on all the new vocabulary we introduce. This could mean simply indicating which syllable is stressed, or it could mean writing the phonemic transcription, in which case we need to make sure our learners can at least read IPA symbols.

9.2 WL: We could add a tailored pronunciation syllabus to our course, focusing on problematic sounds (e.g. / ð /), intonation, connected speech, etc..

9.3 From wish list to reality: My personal approach is to limit pronunciation work to the Q&E techniques. As long as learners are able to pronounce all the target vocabulary properly, so that they can be clearly understood, I consider this to be as far as my job goes with pronunciation. Of course, with some very obscure words, this can involve a lot of research to find out how they are pronounced, but I think this is always worth the effort. But I do not expect my learners to sound like native speakers – in fact, there is considerable evidence for believing that good, clear non-native pronunciation is easier to understand than many native-speaker accents.

10 Functions

10.1 Q&E: As I have already suggested, functional language is very important in my approach to ESP course design. If we teach whole phrases which learners can use in real-life situations, without having to analyse their grammar or create from scratch by translating from their own language, our learners will be both more fluent and more natural-sounding.

Lists of functions are not especially easy to find, but there are banks of useful phrases available online if you search for them (e.g. phrases for business letters: http://www.learn-english-today.com/business-english/business-letters.html). You can also use a business skills book alongside your main course in order to focus on functional language for meetings, presentations, negotiations, etc.. However, as before, this generic approach to ESP course design does not help us create a genuinely tailored course to meet our learners' needs.

10.2 WL: A much better approach is to take the situations we identified in our needs analysis as the starting point, and to use these to generate a bank of useful functional phrases for both written and spoken communication. These can come from the models we used for our reading/writing lessons and our speaking/listening lessons – see above.

10.3 From wish list to reality: During the needs analysis, focus on the situations where your learners will need to use English in their professional lives. Then find, or write with the help of subject experts, good models of professionals performing successfully in those situations. Identify patterns in the phrases in order that they can be grouped according to function. You could create a grouping exercise where your learners place the phrases in functional groups, but of course you need to plan the functional groups in advance. You can also encourage learners to provide their own useful phrases for each functional group, especially ones they have heard or read in real life. Finally, provide plenty of opportunities for learners to practise the phrases in both controlled and free practice activities.

11 Conclusions

As ESP course designers, we need to consider all four skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) and four language areas (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and functions) throughout the process, from the needs analysis through the course design to the actual teaching and, if necessary, re-writing. Of course, we may then choose to focus more on some

skills than others, but we always need to justify this choice on pedagogical grounds, and not simply because it is too difficult to create materials.

We also need to include elements from both the Q&E techniques and the WL techniques. It is of course unrealistic to include all the WL techniques, but we should nevertheless be aware of what our options are. It is perfectly possible to create good home-made ESP courses using only the Q&E techniques – I have done this many times myself – but the more WL techniques we can include, the more effective and useful our course will be.

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