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The Development of an English for Specific Purposes Course at a Thai Public University

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Abstract This paper discusses the scope and sequence of an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course and examines some of the issues in ESP course design. The content of the paper was based on needs identified by the author's experience as an ESL instructor designing and delivering the content-based language program English for hotel at a Thai government university. The sequencing, topics and teaching methodology have been supported, where possible by academic literature.

Keywords English, course, design, sequencing

Introduction

Course structure refers to the selection of topics and the sequencing and organization of the contents of a course. When choosing the topics of a course the educator should always base them around the aims, objectives and goals of the program and the course description. The term English for Specific (or Special, Specified) Purposes refers to the type of language that is used in a particular field or for a specific purpose or activity. ESP arose in the 1960's as employers became concerned that general English courses did not meet their needs or requirements (Brunton, 2009a). It is usually a way of learning or teaching English for specialized subjects that have some specific educational and vocational purposes in mind. In an ESP course, the content is based on the specialized language repertoire that is required by the learners (Tahir, n.d). The following essay discusses the scope and sequencing of the English for hotel course at a Thai government university. The course aims to help students develop the knowledge and language skills necessary to work in a modern hotel. The course focuses on speaking and listening skills but also aims to develop reading and writing skills.

Development of a Hotel English Program

The tourism industry is a valuable commodity to the Thai economy and a valuable source of employment. With changing labour rules within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) community and competition from other tourist destinations it is important that the Thai hotel and hospitality industry offers a quality service (Nicholls, 2014). As language plays an important role in the tourism industry, it is crucial for the training institutions to equip students with the necessary education. Language skills should not be taken for granted since language makes communication effective. Unfortunately, Thai students lack behind many countries in Southeast Asia when it comes to communicating in English. Hotel service, involves communication between the hotel employee and the guest. To communicate effectively, English as a lingua franca is crucial to the students (Yusica, n.d). Graduates are rarely situated at the front office due to their low English proficiency levels. Listening skills have been seen as particularly problematic (Charunsri, 2011).

The English for hotel course is seen as a stepping stone to courses that specialize in areas such as front office, food and beverage and housekeeping English. Before the English for hotel course students take courses that cover basic everyday English. Hotel and hospitality students may not be studying English because they are interested in the subject but because they have to perform a task in English. Due to this many students feel forced into learning the language and lack motivation and confidence in its use (Brunton, 2009b). The proficiency of the students also varies but is generally around the elementary to intermediate level. The course must therefore be adaptable to meet all of the students' needs and requirements. The course must be designed to cover all of the important aspects that the students require at their current level of English mastery.

Before designing the course the educator will need to know whether it is based on a text book as this will guide the sequencing and topics. The author of this study has found that the commercial textbooks available do not always meet the students' needs and requirements. If a textbook has been chosen the students also have some expectancy that the lecturer will work methodically through it. This may restrict adaptability and flexibility if the course needs modifying later. Many of the exercises in hotel English textbooks require the student to read aloud, complete cloze exercises and word searches. In the opinion of the author of this essay, these activities have little value and do not meet the learning objectives of the course. It has been found that many instructors therefore prefer to take activities from various sources and use them to create their own courses. This is more effort but if done correctly generally produces a better result (Sarem, Hamidi, & Mahmoudie, 2013). If a textbook is used the course designer will also need to ensure that the students have not already used it in a previous course of study.

The time constraints of the course will need careful consideration. Assignments and assessments should be spread out to avoid an unrealistic burden for both the students and lecturer. Time will be needed to provide sufficient feedback to the students. At the Thai public university several classes are cancelled each semester at short notice. The students schedule is full so does not allow classes to be made up. The official policy is to set an assignment for the students on the topic that was missed. As the assignment is not graded the quality and effort put into it can vary. It is therefore important to allow for missed classes in the schedule sequencing. Other events such as religious holidays and on campus work can affect the flow of a course. If one lesson leads on and relates to another lesson, this will need scheduling so that a large break does not occur between them causing a loss of focus (Eberly Center, n.d). A topic may take longer than anticipated, it may therefore be necessary to drop a topic from the course. This topic should not include essential information that is required for the rest of the course. The author of this essay usually schedules a less important topic for the last lesson that can be left out if necessary. The creation of a well-planned schedule can be time-consuming but will both help avoid time conflicts and therefore help the course run smoothly and effectively.

The scope of the hotel and hospitality industry is vast and involves various cultural and religious aspects. When designing a course it can be a temptation to try and cover all situations and scenarios. If the educator focuses too much on coverage and includes too many topics it has been found to impede learning by reducing opportunities for students to practice applying the knowledge and skills that they gain (Fallahi, 2007; Fink, 2003). There may also be a temptation to move on to the next topic before the students have fully understood the content. This can result in superficial learning occurring. It is therefore important to determine a reasonable scope of topics for a course. The scope needs to include essential

content but also provide opportunities for students to engage actively with the content so that deep learning occurs. The educator needs to first list the topics and then pare the list down to what is seen as essential (Davis, 1993).

In general, the course should build towards greater complexity (Fink, 2003). It may start with simple vocabulary and structures and work towards synthesis and integration. For example, as the course progresses the students will solve and deal with hotel related problems using the English language. This integrates English and previous knowledge and training from their Hotel and Hospitality bachelor's degree. In regards to integration it is important that each part of the course builds on another part in a way that allows students to integrate each new topic, theme, or idea with the preceding ones as the course proceeds (Basturkmen, 2010). Situational role plays relate to the learning objectives outlined for the course. However the course is organized, the goal should be to create a structure that supports the learning objectives and outcomes. The National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education in Thailand expects bachelor's degree graduates to be able to solve problems (National Qualifications Framework, 2006). The objectives for the English for hotel course make no mention of this skill. The instructional designer therefore needs to ensure that the course meets both the educational institution and government requirements in relation to learning outcomes and instructional goals and objectives.

As mentioned, the hotel and hospitality industry consists of many areas and fields and graduates may be positioned in any department in the hotel. How often graduates communicate with guests is dependent on which department they are situated (Charunsri, 2011). Much of the English language used revolves around wh simple present questions and modal and semi-modal and auxiliary verbs as the majority of hotel communication has been found to revolve around offers, requests and explanations (Sirikhan, & Prapphal, 2011). The language structures used in this course design will be designed so as to allow transfer between situations. For example, the modal verb would, can be used to order food, book a restaurant table and check in and out of a hotel. As the course is at an elementary-intermediate level it is important to keep the language at a reasonably basic level. The topics have been chosen to reflect the needs of the students but to also allow transferability of language. Structures that are used in previous lessons can be recycled throughout the course. Recycling and repetition is important in language acquisition as it is known to foster long term memory and language learning (Thornbury, 2010). The language structures can also be related to the previous English language courses that the students would have taken.

The topics have primarily been chosen to enable communication with foreign visitors and guests. More advanced tasks such as reporting on work progress, hotel policies and procedures and attending meetings are beyond the scope of the course. The topics and language used throughout the course will provide a basis for future courses where these subjects are covered. The course will build on the language and structures acquired in the previous English as a second language courses. The topics and course content have been chosen to enable various role plays and speaking exercises. Reading and writing are secondary considerations and would incorporate simple tasks such as menu reading, taking orders, filling in basic forms and simple apology letters. Grammar will be taught through lexis (basic phrases). The topics covered during the course would include: hotel facilities and services, reservations, receiving guests, guest requests, recommending restaurants, sightseeing, taking food orders, describing and explaining food, complaints and problems in the restaurant and hotel, paying the bill and directions and transport. The dominant functions of the hotel English course are transactional and informational.

The sequencing of lessons can be based around the hotel guest cycle: pre-arrival, arrival, occupancy and departure. The hotel guest cycle has been found to add structure to the sequencing and places the topics in a logical order (Blue, & Harun, 2003). The first topic to be covered would be facilities, services and amenities and is generally a vocabulary based lesson. The language point covered relates to questions such as: Is there..? Are there..? and Does the...? The vocabulary and structures learnt in this lesson form a base and can be recycled throughout the course. The next topic relates to making reservations. This covers both restaurant and hotel reservations as the functions are virtually the same. The use of modal verbs and vocabulary related to dates and times will be covered. This vocabulary can again be recycled throughout the course. Language from the previous lesson can be used to enquire about the hotel facilities and services when performing a reservation role play. The check-in and check-out functions are again reflexive and involve the use of modal verbs. Although they take place on different days, the volume of exchanges and functions between check-in and check-out are almost equal. The topic of receiving guests may also cover appropriate greetings between various cultures. The topic of guest requests may include exchanges such as requesting towels, asking for a taxi or room service. This topic again recycles modal verbs and introduces vocabulary that can be used in future lessons such as making complaints. These exchanges account for a high proportion of hotel exchanges. The topic of making recommendations and sightseeing introduces language that is needed for the lesson on directions. It also forms a basis for the following restaurant lesson and also recycles much of the previous language. The topic of taking food orders can be used to recycle restaurant reservations. Food and beverage vocabulary should be familiar and the lesson can be used to confirm knowledge. Again the language revolves around modal and semi modal verbs such as would, need and can. Food and restaurant recommendations can be used to recycle prior knowledge gained from the previous lesson. Describing and explaining again recycles language previously used in the course. The topic introduces vocabulary used in explanations and descriptions. This vocabulary will be recycled in the following topic of complaints. For example, food adjectives will be used to describe a complaint: This soup is too spicy and salty. The vocabulary used for food preparation covers prepositions which will be recycled in the topic of directions and transport. The topic of paying the bill can be dropped from the course as the contents could be covered during other lessons. If the students are already competent in one or more of the topics, a lesson on hotel safety can be added. The topic of directions and transport can be used to revise the majority of the course content from booking a taxi, paying for transport and any language that can relate to the departure process. The course has some flexibility whereby topics can be combined and condensed or dropped due to unforeseen circumstances. The vocabulary used can be related to the everyday English that a beginner, elementary or intermediate student would be either familiar with or able to acquire within a short period. By adding flexibility, the course can be easily adapted to meet learner needs.

Conclusion

The topics chosen for the course should help learning in the classroom and focus on learners' and society's present and future needs and requirements. The ideas used in the course reflect the usefulness of the course outside the classroom. They are both meaningful and connect to real life situations. The content is both valid and significant. The level of expertise required to teach the course should not be beyond the scope of the average English instructor. All topics would be familiar to anyone that has visited a hotel or restaurant. The topics in the course have been designed to suit the level of the learners. The course covers the basics in regard to topics and language. Each topic has been designed to recycle previous

content and form a basis for future topics. The course offers opportunities for the application of knowledge in problem solving activities. The sequencing allows for some learners being absent for some classes and classes that are cancelled. The course does not rely on a textbook which therefore increases its adaptability and flexibility. The number of topics reflects the length of the semester. The content of each topic can be designed to meet the learning objectives that have been set out in the course brochure and the skills required at bachelor's degree level.

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