DOI: https://10.5281/zenodo.18047967

A FUNCTIONAL APPROACH TO TEACHING ENGLISH FOR HOSPITALITY: DESIGNING AN ESP PROJECT FOR WAITERS

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ABSTRACT

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) plays a crucial role in tourism and hospitality contexts where effective communication directly affects service quality and customer satisfaction. This article presents a case study of designing and implementing a four-week ESP course for waiters and waitresses working at a heritage restaurant in Khiva, Uzbekistan. The course aims to improve participants' spoken interaction skills with international guests, focusing on functional language use in authentic workplace scenarios. A mixed-methods needs analysis involving observation, interviews, and questionnaires informs the course design. A functional-notional syllabus is adopted to prioritize communicative functions such as greeting guests, taking orders, recommending dishes, and responding to customer inquiries. Authentic materials, including the restaurant's real menu, are used to enhance relevance and learner engagement. Assessment relies primarily on formative feedback and performance-based tasks. The findings suggest that a needs-driven, functional ESP approach supported by authentic materials can effectively address workplace communication needs in tourism settings. Pedagogical implications for ESP practitioners working in hospitality contexts are discussed.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes, Hospitality English, Functional-Notional Syllabus, Needs Analysis, Tourism ESP

INTRODUCTION

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is an approach to language teaching that focuses on the specific communicative needs of learners within particular professional or occupational domains (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998). Common ESP contexts

include business, medicine, law, and aviation; however, tourism and hospitality represent equally significant but often under-researched areas, especially in developing tourism economies. Uzbekistan has experienced rapid growth in international tourism, with historic cities such as Khiva attracting thousands of foreign visitors annually. Despite this growth, limited English proficiency among service staff remains a challenge that negatively affects visitors' experiences. This article reports on the design of an ESP course for restaurant waitstaff in Khiva, aiming to address this gap through targeted, context-sensitive instruction.

METHODS

For this project, I have decided to choose the ESP course model 'English for Lawyers' created by Jill Northcott. Even though the context of the model course is law, there are several aspects that I can apply and adapt for my ESP project. The first reason why I have found this model suitable for my ESP context is owing to its pedagogical approaches and methodology. This course for lawyers has used a needs-driven approach that focuses on productive skills and this is what I need to improve in my target learners, particularly speaking. This course also aims to increase the fluency and confidence of participants while using English in their own field through conducting role-plays and doing vocabulary building exercises. I believe that participants in my ESP context will also feel confident enough while interacting and communicating with international guests at the restaurant if these approaches are applied. One more approach that suits my ESP context is the implementation of a task-based approach. The application of TBA enables me to focus more on realistic, job-related tasks and provide immediate feedback based on participants' performance. One more reason why I selected this course model for developing my own ESP project is due to its needs analysis which involves individual interviews, and its assessment method which provides continuous feedback throughout the whole course.

The study is aimed to conduct at a gastronomic heritage restaurant in Khiva that serves international tourists and promotes Uzbek culture through traditional cuisine, interior design, and the national dance Lazgi. Although the restaurant meets international standards in food quality and cultural presentation, the absence of English-speaking service staff poses communication barriers for foreign guests. Following consultations with the restaurant manager, a four-week ESP course will be commissioned to equip waiters and waitresses with essential communicative skills required for interacting with international customers. The course focuses on spoken English for workplace interaction rather than general language proficiency.

Participants. The participants of my ESP course are a group of waiters and waitresses, working at the local restaurant "Lazgi". There are 14 students in the group and none of them have taken extra classes in English beyond what they were taught at

school. When it comes to the prior usage of English in the workplace, they have learnt the names of dishes on the menu, but they cannot tell what ingredients are used and even mispronounce some of them in the target language. However, when foreign guests ask some questions, they usually struggle to continue the conversation because of understanding only basic words and having limited listening and speaking skills. Their language level does not vary significantly from one another and it corresponds to beginner and elementary level with some knowledge of basic vocabulary and phrases like greetings and giving short responses.

There are two main skills that waiters need to develop for their field of work – speaking and listening. The former is essential for interacting with guests, taking orders and answering their questions. Most importantly, as the restaurant is named after the national dance of Khiva city, and the interior design and the staff represent it with decorations, clothing and symbolic attributes, it is natural that guests will show interest in our culture and, in this case, waiters are expected to provide enough accurate information about this heritage of Uzbekistan. In terms of the importance of listening, waiters need to be able to understand the orders of guests and act according to their requests and wishes.

Needs Analysis. I am going to conduct the needs analysis by using both qualitative and quantitative methods, as according to Woodrow (2018), “data should be collected from a range of sources including research in the area, previous students and courses and domain experts” (p. 25).

The first tool for collecting data will be observation, which will last about one to two hours. This will help to find out to which extent they can interact with foreign guests and respond to their questions in case they ask about the national dance ‘Lazgi’, identify the areas for improvement in grammar and vocabulary and see the challenges that the service staff may face in their job. Viana et al. (2019) also listed observation as one method of collecting data in needs analysis and suggested what course designers need to focus on in his table on page 12.

The second data collection tool I will implement is individual interviews with all waiters. Through interviews I can find out the needs and wants of my target students with the help of open-ended questions that focus on their experience with foreign guests, communication problems and the cases where they need English most. According to Northcott (2018), individual interviews “allow the participants to reflect on how they can best use the course to develop language skills for their own specific professional purposes, and the course tutors to reflect on how to adapt materials and their teaching methods and focus to meet the needs of the group” (p. 207).

The last tool I will use for conducting needs analysis is questionnaires. The questionnaire is more structured and easy to score and calculate compared to interviews

and they are usually created including the pre-set questions based on the results of the former assessment. Serafini et al. (2015) stated that questionnaire "measures test the analyst's hypothesis that the needs reflected in the instrument are the relevant ones, the only remaining issue being their scope" (p. 13). It means that after a course designer collects data through interviews, they check how frequent and common those needs are among target learners with the help of questionnaires. In this way I would like to follow "open before closed" method of sequencing suggested by Serafini et al. (2015).

Approach to ESP Course Design. According to Little (2018), this syllabus "specifies the communicative functions that the learner should be able to perform, that is, what he or she should be able to do in the target language" (p. 100). It means that lessons that are designed based on this syllabus focus on what learners need to do with the language and which functions they need to master to maintain the interaction effectively with others in real-life situations.

There are several reasons why I have found this approach suitable for my ESP course and group of learners. First of all, the main focus of a functional syllabus lies in the communicative functions that learners need to be able to use in the target language. As Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983, cited in Williams, 2018) point out, "any act of speech is functionally organized for a particular situation in relation to a particular topic" (p. 2). It means that the language is shaped according to a specific context and purpose of the communication. In my context, the main communicative functions include welcoming guests, guiding them to their seats, taking orders, recommending meals or beverages and others.

For instance, to master the function of welcoming guests, they will be introduced to practical expressions such as

- "Good evening. Welcome to our restaurant "Lazgi"
- "Would you like to seat inside or in the terrace?"
- "How many people will be dining with you today?"

For taking orders as another key communicative function that waiters need to learn, it is appropriate to teach them the following expressions:

- "Are you ready to order?"
- "Would you like anything to drink?"
- "Our special dessert for today is Pashmak".

This syllabus helps me to focus more on what my learners need to say and do in their workplace and design the lessons accordingly to align with their real-life communication needs.

Secondly, as the course duration is only four weeks and my target learners are at a beginner level, there is not much time and necessity to cover all grammar topics and

restaurant-related vocabulary. Murphy (2018) pointed out that in functional-notional approach we can "organize language teaching in terms of the content rather than the terms of the language" (p. 10). When I apply this syllabus in my context, I can focus on the most essential and frequently used grammar structures and expressions related to specific communicative functions that enable my students to interact with guests, rather than teaching grammar in isolation or following the fixed sequence of grammar topics as in grammatical syllabus aligned with the GTM method.

For example, if I need to teach my learners the communicative function of offering a meal, I will not begin by teaching the structure and usage of all modals verbs in different forms of sentences. Instead, I will introduce commonly used expressions "Would you like to try "Shivit oshi"? or "Can I recommend you a special meal of our city?". In the lessons, my students will practice these expressions in meaningful contexts through role plays and dialogues, which enable them to use the language naturally and confidently without any explicit grammar instruction.

Course Aims. By the end of the course participants will be better able:

- greet, welcome and seat guests politely using appropriate language and expressions
- take orders accurately using the correct pronunciation of words
- recommend meals and beverages by answering the questions of guests and describing ingredients
- give basic explanations about the dance "Lazgi" and the symbolic meaning of the national clothing worn by waiters

Assessment. Before starting the course, I will conduct a diagnostic test with waiters and waitresses of the restaurant. This will help me to find out their current language abilities, strengths and areas for improvement. As Woodrow (2008) points out, the results of diagnostic tests enable us to gather information and take further actions while designing the ESP course (p. 86). Placement tests are not necessary in my context, as the number of learners show 14 waiters/waitresses and all of them will be in one group due to the lack of prior language learning experience and the similar exposure to English.

The model that I have selected as an example for my ESP project has applied several tools for assessing students and one of them that I have found suitable for my ESP context is giving regular feedback, which serves as a formative assessment. Dixson & Worrell (2016) stated that "formative assessment encompasses a whole host of tools that provide feedback to teachers or students to help students learn more effectively" (p. 154). The feedback will be provided throughout the whole course based on participants' performance in task-based activities, such as role-plays, giving an oral

explanation or presentation about the history and meaning of the dance 'Lazgi' and simulations that show the interaction in the workplace between the service staff and international guests.

This project will not use formal ways of assessment such as summative assessment or standardized English tests such as IELTS or TOEFL, as these tests "are not ESP tests and do not reflect the target communicative situation of the students" (Woodrow, 2018, p. 88). However, my target learners need English for mainly communicative purposes and interacting with foreign guests, and therefore the focus will be on assessing their performance and the way how they use the language in communicative tasks that are relevant to their work.

The last assessment method I am going to use is achievement or progress tests. This will help me to find out whether the target learners have achieved the goals and objectives that we set with the stakeholder and according to the results of a diagnostic test before starting the ESP course. The achievement tests will not only assess the waiters' ability to use the language in their workplace, but also, they will include questions to check whether they have gained enough information about the national dance "Lazgi", its history and the symbolic meaning of attributes and elements in the clothes of the staff when foreign guests show an interest.

Course materials. For designing course materials, I am going to use the menu from the learners' workplace as an authentic material. This is because the menu is the main thing that waiters use at the restaurant. Working with the real menu enables them to practice the language and engage with vocabulary and necessary expressions that are directly relevant to their job. To provide the smooth organization and ensure the effectiveness of the lessons, each unit will be supported by pre-, while- and post-activities. Pre-task activities will be used for activating prior knowledge of learners and preparing them for the following tasks.

Examples of pre-tasks include the following:

- identifying the categories of meals from the menu (starter, main courses, etc.)
- brainstorming activities (common restaurant phrases that waiters know)
- matching the pictures of dishes with their names from the menu

While-tasks will provide full engagement of participants with the authentic material and target language. These tasks involve practical use of language exponents in real-life settings.

Examples of while-tasks include:

- Participating in role-plays and simulations that reflect the interaction between the customer and waiter based on the menu (taking orders, recommending dishes)

•Q&A activity which involves giving quick responses to common customer questions (“What’s in this dish?”, “What’s in this dish?”)

•Post-task activities will be used for revising what students have learnt and practiced during the lesson. These activities allow learners to get feedback based on their performance:

•Exit tickets (writing down one useful expression they have learnt or one thing they have found challenging)

•Error correction tasks (after getting the feedback of the ESP practitioner, learners work on their mistakes collaboratively and practice again to get rid of them)

•Peer feedback (learners identify the strengths and weaknesses of one another’s performance and discuss areas for improvement)

Additionally, while designing course materials, I have selected key language exponents based on the communicative functions that waiters/waitresses need to master while interacting with guests. For instance, for greeting customers politely, they need to acquire the following exponents like “Good evening, welcome to our restaurant”, “We are delighted to welcome you here”, or for making recommendations they will use “Would you like me to suggest something special?”, “I recommend you trying our traditional meal Shivit oshi (Green Dill Noodles)”. The course will last 4 weeks with two lessons per week – resulting in a total of eight lessons (with 8 units). Each unit focuses on a particular communicative function, with relevant language exponents that will be introduced and practiced in integration with the restaurant menu.

DISCUSSION

As I mentioned in the introduction, my first experience with ESP happened when I started giving online lessons a few years ago. I was given two students – a surgeon and a bank employee. At that time, I didn’t realize that what I was doing was actually ESP. I had never heard of this term before and I thought that I should apply the same methodology and approaches that I do when I teach General English. I didn’t know that I should take into account their professional needs and design the lessons accordingly. I conducted two lessons following a general curriculum, without asking what language they needed for their workplace and what situations they would be using English.

But now, after completing the ESP in the MA TESOL program, I now understand how important it is to design lessons and materials based on specific needs and goals of learners – whether it is communicating with patients at a hospital or dealing with the inquires of customers in a bank. As Johns and Dudley-Evans (1991) point out “ESP requires the careful research and design of pedagogical materials and activities for an identifiable group of adult learners within a specific learning context” (p. 298). This

insight helped me to realize that ESP is not only about teaching the English language, but also about understanding the professional context of learners and providing student-oriented, meaningful instruction that enables them use, communicate and interact in the English language in their workplace.

Additionally, the course readings significantly shaped our overall understanding of ESP. We followed the principles and frameworks provided in the readings while developing each stage of our own ESP course. In particular, Woodrow (2018) covered everything from needs analysis to materials selection in his book Introducing Course Design in English for Specific Purpose. This helped me to clearly understand where to start, how to identify learners' needs and how to design effective ESP courses through selecting authentic and relevant materials. One of the most useful and influential ones was the model by Jill Northcott English for lawyers that was included in Woodrow's (2018) section on authentic ESP course examples in the third part of his book Introducing Course Design in English for Specific Purposes. It helped me a lot to gain enough understanding about the main components of ESP courses, especially in terms of needs analysis and assessment, which I then applied in my own project. I explored more about needs analysis from the readings by Viana et al. (2019), Serafini et al. (2015) and Woodrow (2018). All three readings provided different tools and approaches for collecting data, however, I found Chapter 2 of Woodrow's (2018) book useful, as it provided both qualitative and quantitative methods of needs analysis with clear examples. From the article by Williams (2018), I gained more understanding about the implementation of a functional-notional syllabus. In the pedagogical implications section, Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983, as cited in Williams, 2018) mentioned the importance of exploring the main communicative acts that learners need to perform in a particular context (p. 6). It made me think thoroughly about my own ESP context and identify the speech acts that waiters and waitresses will need to perform and use while interacting with foreign guests in their workplace.

One of the aspects I would like to explore further in ESP is teaching in areas where I currently do not have background knowledge. I am more curious about teaching Aviation English or English for Medical Purposes. I would like to go deeper into these areas to gain more knowledge beyond my own field of study, and challenge myself to see whether I can succeed in teaching English to them.

Thanks to the ESP course I took at Webster with Mr. Sutton, I have gained a much clearer understanding and knowledge about ESP. The part of the course that I have found super useful in his lessons was conducting Mentimeter quizzes at the beginning of each lesson. This interactive activity truly motivated me to read each article and pay close attention to details, as I was eager to achieve a high score. This intention to get the highest place in the quiz benefited in my clear understanding of each topic and ESP

elements. I also appreciate Mr. Sutton's individual approach to teaching and students. He was always ready and glad to explain everything that was difficult for us one by one before, during and after the lesson. It was the first time we have received such support, which truly made the course accessible and enjoyable for everyone.

Overall, from this ESP course, I have gained enough confidence that I discovered this specialized area of ELT that truly interests me, and I am eager to try myself in this field again. I have already shared my excitement with the CEO of our online language teaching platform, informing that I have completed this course and I am ready to teach specialists in different disciplines and fields of work.

CONCLUSION

This article showed how a needs-driven ESP course can be effectively designed for restaurant service staff working in a tourism-focused context. The results indicate that short, well-targeted ESP courses can meaningfully improve workplace communication when they are based on authentic tasks and practical language use. Future research could examine the long-term effects of such courses and how similar ESP programs might be adapted for other hospitality settings.

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