

ESP for Polo Players: A bizarre subject

Silvia E. Benson

Universidad Nacional del Centro de la Provincia de Buenos Aires

This article deals with the design of an ESP course for polo players in Argentina, with practical insights supported by success and failure when teaching throughout years, as well as the theoretical background underlying the procedures.

In my teaching experience in Argentina I have come across several bizarre ESP teaching situations. One of which certainly has been a desperate polo player or pony carer demanding urgent classes because he has got the opportunity of his life: he will be taken on by a sponsor provided he can communicate in the language of the country where he is to go to. It is known that Argentinian polo players have good market around the world and though polo is not a science it requires ESP lessons due to mainly, specific lexical items. Therefore you are supposed to be a fairy godmother who will wave her magic wand and this man will be in full command of the language.

The reason for which teachers meet false beginners is that students' school experience of English is so impoverished that they do not have the incentive to learn the language being caused, among others by the low priority schools give to the subject in response to undemanding requirements for university entry, as well as certain antipathy, in some quarters, toward the language of colonial power (Pierson & Fu, 1982). The aim of this article is to put forward some ideas that might help other teachers when facing a similar circumstance.

What do you do? Where do you start? Panic gets hold of you. Where do you find a text that deals with this subject? Perhaps the nearest you have been of a horse is a picture so which is your starting point because you do not intend to lose this prospective student. I propose to follow Hutchinson & Waters' figure that points out the factors affecting ESP course design: the why, the what and the how are the key questions at this stage (see Figure 1).

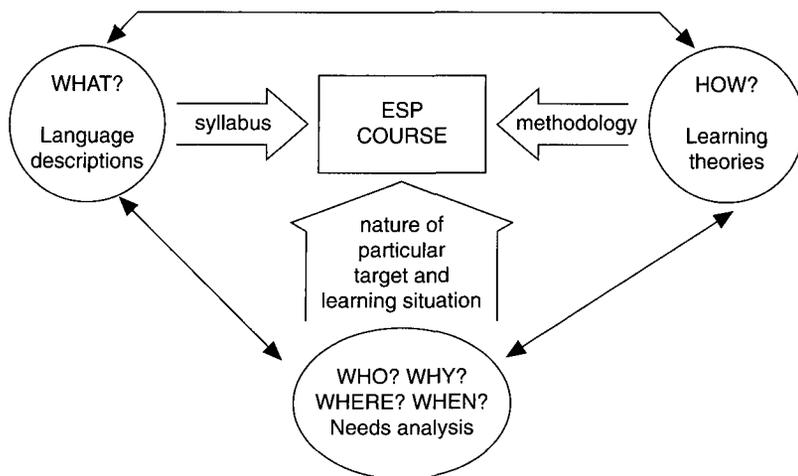


Figure 1: Factors affecting ESP course design

Addressing the first, we must go in for a needs analysis. We must have an exhaustive interview with this potential student to discover his real needs. Once again panic will overcome you when asking what he needs to learn, for he is certain to say something like: "Everything. Speak, read, listen, and write. I have to stipulate my contracting conditions, get lodging, tickets, food; understand my boss, talk to my team mates but (this the great issue) no grammar, please." You will smile and innocently ask: "When are you leaving?" to be answered: "In two or three months' time." Your head will be running seeking a solution. You suggest an intensive course but your potential student cannot devote more than a couple of hours a day to studying. So negotiation carries on and you may arrange for a daily two hour session omitting sacred Saturday and Sunday for those are tournament days.

Another important question at this point is whether your future student has ever been abroad. This is relevant to the design of the course for he will provide you with very specific information. If he has been out of his country, he will know exactly what he wants to learn and this will be of great help to you; you will not be making guesses and creating unrealistic situations besides when simulating one, he will get what you are aiming at.

Another interesting point I would like to make concerns the "what" factor where the fact that the student who did not want to learn grammar is sure to come back to you after his six months abroad wanting the "skeleton" or the "rules for sentence building." He will tell you that he was able to communicate because you had given him the communicative functions and notions but he needs to handle the "rules." It would be supported by Widdowson (1990: 165) that "grammatical knowledge does not always follow as corollary of communication", inasmuch complementing Brumfit (1984) that "grammar is assimilated incidentally as a function of communicative tasks and is likely to develop in an "organic" rather than "additive" manner. It should thus be presented on the basis of what learners need to know in order to get things done."

Evidences from studies such as the ones carried out by McLaughlin (1985), Swain (1985), Wong Fillmore (1985a, 1985b) suggest that children not only need to interact meaningfully with content but also need to be taught the target language in a systematic manner, enabling them to use the same linguistic items repeatedly.

A further point to add to the previous is making your student aware of the difference between spoken and written language. Quoting Halliday: "Written language is not spoken language written down. Writing and speaking are not just alternative ways of doing the same thing; rather they are ways of doing different things." Moreover, your student needs to stipulate contracting conditions so he should know about formal and informal language in both modes. For further reference see McCarthy & Carter (1988).

In addition to the "what to teach", vocabulary comes into the scene. Because as Krashen (1983) says:

Vocabulary is basic to communication. If acquirers do not recognise the meaning of the key words by those who address them they will be unable to participate in the conversation. If they wish to express some idea or ask for information they must be able to produce lexical items to convey their meaning. Indeed, if our students know the morphology and the syntax of an utterance addressed to them, but do not know the meaning of key lexical items, they will be unable to

participate in the communication. For this reason, we are not impressed with approaches that deliberately restrict vocabulary acquisition and learning until the morphology and syntax are mastered.

How do we, teachers, find out the vocabulary of polo without the appropriate text? One thing to do, if possible, is to visit the polo field and become acquainted with the game itself, learn from the players, and you will be surprised at the amount of words they handle which are English (eg.: chucker, mallet). This fact will be the clue to get them started in mastering the speaking skill as the confidence with those lexical items will enhance their self-esteem.

In general, self-esteem leads to self-confidence. The degree of self-esteem and/or self-confidence may vary from situation to situation or from task to task. Both may increase as one performs well in a variety of situations. Oller (1981) argues that the relationship between affect and learning is probably bidirectional. We may perform well because our attitude toward self is positive; we may have a positive attitude; we may have a positive attitude toward self because we perform well (see also Gardner, Lalonde & Moorcroft, 1985).

Complementing the communicative functions and notions that this kind of students requires, where we include booking a room, buying, talking about the present, past and future, we must incorporate letter/fax writing, especially business ones, negotiation skills such as arguing for better salaries, percentages, etc. Obviously it implies scrutinizing different texts and finding the right lesson. I have found many a time that these students have letters, faxes, catalogues and other written material which are what we need and that are actually very meaningful for they are authentic. Authentic material seems to increase motivation.

Another interesting point to highlight is the student's destination. We should arouse their awareness to cross-cultural differences that influence communication between human beings. I have had students whose initial destination has been the UK and then they have gone as far as Brunel or the USA to later land in Belgium. Upon arrival they have expressed the need of knowing certain cultural aspects but have also accepted the existence of a standard English.

Relating the "what" and the "how" factors, Richard-Amato (1988: 17) refers to Breen and Candling, saying that

Breen and Candling characterize an effective communicative approach as being one in which a shared knowledge is explored and modified as a result. It implies a negotiation of "potential meanings in a new language" and it implies a socialization process. Breen and Candling reject systems in which the learner is separated from that which is to be learned as though the target language could be objectively broken down into isolated components. They argue further that "In a communicative methodology, content ceases to become some external control over learning-teaching procedures. Choosing directions becomes a part of the curriculum itself, and involves negotiation between learners and learners, learners and teachers, and learners and text." Thus, they feel that a negotiation for meaning is crucial to a successfully applied communicative methodology. This idea seems to suggest the need for greater interdependence and greater flexibility on the parts of teachers and students to allow the syllabus and its content to develop in ways that make acquisition of the target language most likely.

In my experience, flexibility and interdependency play a major role in ESP lessons when the teacher is not an expert in the student's field of interest.

Following up the "how", not emphasizing correction will be a key to bear in mind, just as J. Asher puts it: "If the training starts with explicit learning such as audio-lingual that emphasizes error-free production, correct form, and conscious rule learning, the risk is that most children and adults will give up before even reaching the intermediate level". This statement is also supported and extended by M. Lewis (1990: 15)

In the real world language is used for pragmatic purposes - to get things done. You make your meaning as clear as it needs to be for the other participant in the conversation to understand as clearly as is necessary to achieve your common purpose. Normally, you are not trying in any formal sense to say what you mean precisely, you are simply trying to get something done. This gives rise to a very important distinction between "correct" and "successful" language. The former, traditionally central to language teaching, emphasizes usage,

signification, and formal criteria of correctness; the latter emphasizes pragmatic effectiveness. It is successful language which mirrors the true nature of language, as means rather than end.

Besides, "learners acquire a second language through trial and error, mistakes are part of the natural process" as Rigg & Hudelson (1986) and Krashen & Terrel (1983) state.

Using that authentic material previously mentioned will provide a considerable amount of comprehensible input within a meaningful context which will give credit to a Second Language Development ESP principle issued by Krashen & Terrel: "Comprehension naturally precedes production during the process of ESP."

Another point is to focus on purposeful content-related activities for "Second language competency develops most quickly when the learner focuses on accomplishing tasks rather than focusing on the language itself." (Rigg & Hudelson; Krashen & Terrel).

Since we generally have time constraints I would advise in order not to waste time and to get good immediate learning results that you submit your student to a learning style test such as that in J. Reid's book. It will also help in the course design.

To round this off I would like to say that when the student returns from his adventure he will drop in with a nosebag of anecdotes about the use and usage of language from which you are bound to learn a great deal, this being genuine feedback on your work of art: ESP teaching.

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