



DESIGNING SPEAKING ACTIVITIES FOR A TEACHER- PREPARATION COURSE: AN ESP APPROACH[†]

*Leticia Araceli Salas Serrano*¹

¹ Benemérita Universidad de Puebla, BUAP
Puebla, México, aracelisalas@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

Turning a top-down teacher-preparation course into a meaningful course for teachers involves the identification of the needs of the learners. This article shows the way a general English course for junior high school English teachers became an ESP (English for Specific Purposes) course that aimed at meeting the expectations and personal goals of the participants. Teacher-preparation has become an important issue in Mexico as a teacher evaluation process is being carried out along the country as part of recent educational reforms. The results of the needs analysis instrument identified speaking as the most difficult skill for the teachers to master and the most necessary one to carry out their teaching activities. Based on the participants' answers, a complement to the original content of the course was created so that participants could reach their own goals in addition to the institutional goals of the preparation. ESP may be an alternative to help learners perform their professional activities in the target language more effectively.

Key Terms: *ESP, needs, meaningful learning, learner-centered instruction, speaking, autonomy*

INTRODUCTION

Sharing one of the longest borders between two countries (Mexico and the USA) does not automatically make all Mexicans speak English as it is commonly thought. English is taught as EFL (English as a foreign language) in most educational contexts in the country, as it is the norm in Latin American countries. This situation has put English teachers and teacher-education in the center of discussions and debates about language education not only in Mexico but also in different countries around the world. The demand for well-prepared English teachers has increased due to educational reforms that require English to be taught from primary education SEP (2011). In consequence, many programs to update teachers have appeared all along the country; however, some of the programs and courses do not match the teachers' expectations. In this article, the implementation of an ESP approach during a teacher preparation course is explained and explored based on the views of the facilitator and the teacher-students. Experience had suggested that general *top down* (Fullan 1989, 1991) in-

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service teacher training does not usually fulfill the needs that teachers perceive as urgent for pursuing their development and evaluation goals.

ESP is immersed in the field of Language for Specific Purposes (LSP), which claims that the study of contextualized language use, English in this case, and the accommodation of pedagogy serve specific communities especially at workplace, hence, ESP focuses on professional discourses. Johnson and Christensen (2004, p. 14) exemplified this by saying that ESP is “an approach for the generation of knowledge that places high regard for empirical data and follows certain norms and practices that develop overtime because of their usefulness” for a specific community.

The aim of the ESP approach was to enhance teachers in exploring their own needs regarding the teacher evaluation that was taking place in the country so that the course could be more significant for them. It was expected that the Needs Analysis (NA) performed at the beginning of the course would provide the foundations for adapting the contents of the course to their own needs. The NA would also become an instrument for self-examination and reflection, either individually or in collaboration with peers turning a course that was originally imposed on them (top-down) into a meaningful experience constructed upon their needs. Based on the learner-centered movement (Nunan, 1988), ESP has become a more learning-centered (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Weimer, 2002; Blumberg, 2009) approach, focusing not only on what people learn but also on what they need the language for, resulting in meaningful learning (Ausebel, 2002).

This ESP research was carried out during an updating course for teachers of public junior high schools in the State of Puebla, Mexico. The course was part of the actions taken by educational authorities in order to prepare teachers for a national evaluation in the venues of the Benemérita Universidad de Puebla (BUAP). Although there was a textbook used for the language content of the course, the ESP approach became the central part of this study. ESP theory and principles are based on the idea that the language needs of target learners must be identified as Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p.19) claimed in their fundamental work on ESP. More recently, Smoak (2003) gave a more functional definition of ESP:

“ESP is English instruction based on actual and immediate needs of learners who have to successfully perform real-life tasks unrelated to merely passing an English class or exam. ESP is needs based and task oriented. Teaching ESP is demanding, time consuming, and different for every group of students. ESP is a challenge for all who teach it and it offers virtually unlimited opportunities for professional growth” (Smoak, 2003, p. 27).

ESP may provide an appropriate framework for professionals who want to sharpen certain skills during their practice. The study presents the case of a group of English teachers who were asked to attend an in-service teacher education course. To be an effective teacher requires a combination of professional knowledge and specialized skills as well as personal experiences and qualities, Richards (2006) argues. Being this a teacher-education course, it was necessary to make the course meaningful and relevant for the teacher-students. The central aim of the course was to get teacher-students on track in order to face the evaluation required by educational reforms in Mexico. Bailey, Curtis, and Nunan (2001) claim that teachers need to acquire more content knowledge, skills and techniques to add to their

academic base so that they participate in professional development activities. Hyland (2000) has referred to the importance that the knowledge and control of specialized discourses are related to status and credibility of the individual when performing in the target language. Therefore, it was important to provide in-service teachers an adequate and appropriate course that would lead them to success in their teacher evaluation. Chisman and Crandall (2007) found that when teachers are exposed to new techniques and resources, they tend to innovate more and to perform better in the scenario of teacher evaluation processes going on in their context. According to the ESP approach adopted, a NA questionnaire was designed and applied, in that way, participants could express their specific needs before taking the in-service English teacher-education course.

Learning a language involves the learning, developing and mastering of the four abilities: listening, reading, speaking and writing. It is well known that many teachers try to incorporate all four skills areas into their planning and teaching, though, as Oxford (2001) says, some classes may focus more on one set of skills or the other, due to the course and learner objectives. Teaching all skills in a class might seem a complex task, as learners, are usually more focused on developing one or two of the skills to fulfill their own personal or professional goals when learning a language.

Speaking is a very important part of second language learning as it is the evidence of the knowledge and competence in the target language. The ability to communicate in a second language clearly and efficiently becomes a priority when the students are teachers of English. In spite of all the technology and globalization, it is still the teacher who becomes the role model of the language, especially in junior high schools in Mexico. Therefore, it is important for language teachers to feel confident about their own speaking skills, as the results of the needs analysis of this study proved.

In order to guide this ESP study, three research questions emerged: What are the specific needs of a group of High School English teachers to complement the contents of an in-service English Teachers? How can a *top down* English course become more meaningful for teachers by addressing their specific needs? How can the teachers in this context develop strategies for continuous and autonomous language learning and professional development once the course finishes?

Literature Review

Teachers and the quality of their teaching have now been recognized by UNESCO (2004) as one of the most critical factors in the quality of education. “In-service training” is the term used for short-term workshops or short courses that offer teachers information or ideas according to Cochran-Smith & Lytle, (2001). The nature of the in-service training courses and workshops mainly depends on their authorities or the agreements made between institutions.

These commonly short-term courses have the purpose to help teachers update their skills and techniques to adequate them to the emerging methods or requirements from the institutions where they work. According to Burns & Richards (2009), there are two reasons why teachers opt for professional development; a) from their own initiative or internal

reasons to become better teachers and b) from external factors, such as the teachers in this study who were undergoing through an evaluation process in Mexico.

To perform well both during evaluation processes and in their performance in the classroom, teachers need to feel comfortable and in command of the subject they are teaching, that is the knowledge content of their discipline, that is the implicit knowledge a teacher must hold as Richards (1996) says. In the English Language Teaching field, (ELT) teachers must also consider the language competencies that are necessary for an effective performance in the classroom. According to Richards (2006), these include the ability to provide good language models; to maintain use of the target language in the classroom; to give correct feedback on learner language, and to provide input at an appropriate level of difficulty.

The level of English taught in Mexico in Junior High School is very basic, being this between the A1 and A2 levels of the CEFR. This situation does not allow English teachers to have a regular practice of the language at a higher level, in consequence, these teachers demand more challenging opportunities in order to raise the level of English they commonly use in their classrooms. Knowing what their needs are became essential as English teachers in Mexico are facing reforms which include an evaluation to keep their jobs. To identify the teachers' needs and priorities ESP seemed to be the best option.

One of the branches of ESP is EOP, (English for Occupational Purposes) which allows learners to perform their professional tasks in the target language. By giving instruction a specific context, Lorenzo (2005) says that ESP concentrates more on language in context than on teaching grammar and language structures. Motivation plays, then, an important role as tasks and activities become meaningful and could lead to autonomy and self-direction as Carter (1983) mentioned, given that an ESP course aims at turning learners into users of the language. Kaur and Clarke (2009) claim that an ESP course looks for enabling learners to function adequately in a target situation in the target language, that is, in real contexts where learners will use English for their specific purposes. This concern about effective use of the language is important in ESP, as the target language must be used to perform professional tasks efficiently.

As mentioned in the introduction, ESP means to design instruction according to the learner's needs and priorities. ESP has always been associated with the context and requirements of the environment in which it occurs. Belcher (2004) claims that ESP keeps track of sociodiscoursal, sociacultural and sociopolitical issues of the society in which the language is needed, as users of ESP are usually placed in professional fields. However, as Belcher (2006) affirms, ESP now encompasses what seems to be a diverse and expanding range of purposes as teacher-preparation in the middle of educational reforms helping teachers achieve their own purposes when their needs are identified and met.

To become a continuous and autonomous language learner has become a requirement for teachers, as it is very difficult to keep pace with all changes going on in the language educational field and the increasing number of methods and materials that claim their effectiveness. An autonomous learner might make decisions on their own learning more appropriately. Holec (1981) was the first to define "autonomy" as the "ability to take charge

of one's own learning” (p. 3). Benson (1997) has also identified autonomy as “the act of learning a language outside the framework of an educational framework and without the intervention of a teacher” in the long term. Teachers could take charge of their own learning for their own professional learning.

Nowadays, technology might provide language learners with tools and resources, not only to teach, but also to improve their own abilities in English. By developing their language skills teachers can become more confident, especially when speaking the language in the classroom. Speaking is "the process of building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols, in a variety of contexts" Chaney and Burk, (1998, p. 13) claim. This ability, which is considered one of the productive skills, is also the most difficult to master, as it requires not only the competence but also the adequate performance of the language user. Bailey and Savage (1994, p.7) say that speaking in a second or foreign language has been regarded as the most demanding of the four skills.

RESEARCH METHOD

The article reports an ESP study carried out under the lens of the qualitative tradition. Creswell (2009, pp.175-6) points out that qualitative research is based on some common characteristics such as collecting data from direct interaction with people, observing behaviour or interviewing people and building patterns, categories or themes from analysis. Qualitative studies focus on the meaning that participants build from their experiences. However, Creswell also mentions that the interpretation to qualitative data is seen through the researcher's background, history, context and prior understanding. The study relied on the ESP approach to identify the needs of participants in order to provide learner-center instruction, which aimed at meeting those needs more effectively according to Dudley-Evans & St. Johns, (1997), Johns (2000) and Hyland (2000) among others.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Context

The context of the study was a teacher-preparation course for a group of teachers of the public High Schools of the state of Puebla, Mexico. The course originated from the need of these teachers to update their language skills in the frame of a teachers' evaluation process. Therefore, the aim of the course was to equip participants with strategies, tools and resources that allowed them to be better prepared for the evaluation that was taking place in their context. It is relevant to mention that not all the teachers were willing to spend their weekends either traveling from their hometowns or taking classes, which they did not want to attend as it was a decision made by their authorities. For some of these teachers, this experience was the first in-service teacher education course they had taken in years.

The course was designed as a blended learning course with face-to-face sessions one day a week complemented with the use of a free platform (Edmodo) for independent use. The length of the course was for six weeks. The face-to-face sessions were scheduled from 4 to 8pm on Fridays, however, contact between learners and facilitator was constant because participants could ask questions and receive feedback during the week through the platform. The tasks on the Edmodo platform included the submission of assignments and the

participation of participants in forums related to the content of the material on the platform. There were also folders with articles, links and extra materials that teachers could use during the course or download for further use in their teaching practice.

Participants

The group of junior high school English teachers who took the teacher-preparation course consisted of thirty teacher-students. For the present study, only five students were invited to participate and to be tracked during the five-week course. These participants were the teacher-students who showed a big commitment and enthusiasm for the course during an interview scheduled before the beginning of the course. The interview had the purpose to know if the teacher-students were able to hold a conversation in the target language as the course was carried out completely in English. After identifying the participants, six teachers received an invitation to participate in the study. Five out of the six teachers answered positively to the request and the questionnaire was sent to them by mail. They were also informed about the nature of the study and their participation. Table 1 shows some general information about the participants:

Table 1. The Participants

PARTICIPANT	YEARS OF EXPERIENCE	ACADEMICAL BACKGROUND
Lucy	12	Normal School in English Teaching
Patty	10	University graduate in English Teaching
Eduardo	10	Normal School in English Teaching
Sandra	15	Normal School in English Teaching
Martha	8	University graduate in English Teaching

Instrument

According to ESP specialists, a language needs analysis is necessary for designing an appropriate and effective language course. For example, Dudley-Evans and St John (1998, p. 122) argue: “needs analysis is the corner stone of ESP and leads to a focused language course”. The difference between ESP courses and general ELT courses is that ‘they centre on analysis of learners’ needs’ Basturkmen, (2010, p. 3). For Brown (1995), needs analysis is “the systematic collection and analysis of subjective and objective information necessary to define and validate defensible curriculum purposes that satisfy the language learning requirements of students within the context of particular institutions that influence the learning and teaching situation” (p. 36). Long (2005) also underlines the importance of carrying out needs analysis and doing research based on needs analysis. Then, carrying out a need analysis process was a priority in order to perform the study.

The fact that the course was about to start made the creation of a questionnaire the most suitable instrument to collect information to complement the textbook appointed for the course. The questionnaire consisted of three sections, the first section was aimed at collecting general information from participants, as well as the perception they had about their level of English, including an open question on this issue. The second section had the purpose of

exploring the linguistic needs of the participants by asking them about the skills which were the most important to perform their work well, teaching, in this case. There were also questions about their preferences regarding the activities they might do in the classroom.

The last section consisted of three open questions about; a) the ways English could help them in their job, b) their perception of using technology in the classroom and c) the time they were willing to invest in their English learning, in and out of the classroom. Once the instrument was created, the researcher piloted it with another group of students with similar characteristics in order to validate it.

Data Gathering Procedure

After the instrument was created, piloted and validated, it was sent to the participants by mail stating the purpose of the study. All five participants acknowledged the reception of the instrument. It took five days for participants to send their answers back; three days before the beginning of the course. After collecting all questionnaires, the answers were then organized in charts, which will be presented in the following section.

Data Analysis

When the questionnaires were answered and sent back, the answers were organized in charts or ranked in lists. Some of their answers have been used in the description of the participants in this document. The answers to the following questions are shown in the following section. Then, the answers were used to design a tailor-made complement the content of the textbook for the course according to what the participants expressed. Table 2 shows the participants' answers in relation to their level of proficiency of the language and their perceptions on the reasons for their answers.

Table 2. The Participants' Level of English

PARTICIPANT	LEVEL OF PROFICIENCY	WHY?
Lucy	B1	<i>It is difficult for me to express my ideas in English.</i>
Patty	B1	<i>I want to have good fluency, I can't speak well.</i>
Eduardo	A2	<i>I never practice English out of the classroom. I only practice when I teach with the textbook. It's very basic English.</i>
Martha	A2	<i>We don't have any opportunities to practice the real language.</i>
Sandra	B1	<i>I have lost all my fluency.</i>

The results of the second section of the questionnaire showed that the five participants considered that speaking was the most important skill to perform their job as teachers.

I. - The order of the skills according to the importance the participants gave to each one was;

- a) Speaking 1
- b) Listening 2

c) Reading 3

d) Writing 4

II. - Some of the activities they said they had to do in the classroom using English were;

a) Being a model for their students,

b) Giving instructions,

c) Answering their students' questions,

d) Preparing their classes,

e) Using the target language as the means of instruction in the classroom.

For question three, four of the participants said they wanted to practice listening and speaking in their new English course, because it was difficult for them to speak in front of their students and to understand the material they had to use with their students. Interestingly, the participants described their ideal English course (question 4) as one in which they could feel safe and they could practice English with their peers. They demanded for an active and dynamic class as an ideal environment to learn. When asked about technology, the participants asked for websites and webpages for their own use and for using in their classes. The participants expressed their need and willingness to learn more about technology in the classroom, however, some of them said that they didn't have the facilities to use technology. Two of them said they were afraid of technology as their students seemed to know more than what they knew.

The participants said they could invest up to three or four hours a week out of their class to practice English on their own. The teachers said that by feeling confident and more prepared they could perform their job better and in the long term, that would help them in getting good results in the teachers' evaluation process taking place in Mexico at the time.

After the results of the needs analysis were organized and the outcomes showed that teachers had their own goals and objectives when taking a teacher-preparation course or workshop. These goals should "serve as the basis for developing tests, materials, teaching activities, and evaluation strategies as well as for reevaluating the precision accuracy of the original needs assessment" (Brown, 1995, p. 35). Therefore, a complement for the textbook was designed so that the course could be more meaningful for participants and they can make the most of the experience, which for many of them was an imposed task from their authorities.

The Proposal

An important feature of ESP is the identification of a PSA (Present Situation Analysis) which refers to the moment and situation when the ESP course starts and set a TSA (Target Situation Analysis) according to Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998). TSA includes objective, perceived and product-oriented needs derived from the needs analysis results. After analyzing the participants' answers, their needs were identified and a complement to the initial content of the course was designed. The teachers' expressed that their main concern was that their oral performance, followed by their need to practice listening. Therefore, organizing the ESP course was an important step to help teacher-students achieve their own goals and meeting the needs and make the course more meaningful for them. The PSA

showed that the teachers of the study do not feel confident about their performance and speaking skills of the language they teach, being the TSA a scenario where they felt more in control of their speaking and they could perform the activities of their profession more confidently.

As it was previously mentioned, the course was six weeks long and students and facilitator met once a week for a 4-hour session. The rest of the week, they kept in touch through the platform, where learners could practice on their own and submit their tasks. To help them increase their fluency, some activities were developed using free websites and the use of the Edmodo platform. The task based complement to the course followed what Ur (2012) says as tasks provide a goal direction that might result in a concrete tangible outcomes. The tasks had the additional intention to provide teacher-students with models for the design of their own speaking activities for class. These complementing speaking activities and the corresponding websites are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. The Speaking Activities

WEEKS FOCUS ON:	ACTIVITIES	WEBSITES
1. -Rhythm, intonation and stress	Teacher-students choose one video, Identify the stressed words and record the audio of the video with their own voice.	Voice of America VOA
2. -Content and meaning	Teacher-students choose one of the real stories and record the summary in their own voice.	Listenwise AmericanStories
3. -A poem Intonation Meaning	Teacher-students select one poem and record: a) The poem b) Their reasons for their election.	Poets.org/ TOP-100-Poems.
4. -An interview Grammar, Meaning	Teacher-students select a famous person from the webpages and record an interview of ten questions for their famous person.	Famouspeoplelessons
5. -An opinion Expressing meaning	Teacher-students choose a piece of current news and record their opinions on the issue.	Free
6. -The final reflection	Teacher-students record their final reflections on the course explaining how they are going to use what they have learned.	Free

Through these activities, the teacher-students had the opportunity to practice speaking, which was their main concern, outside the classroom and as a complement of the textbook for the course and enabling them to act autonomously as they chose the activities they wanted to carry out on their own. The speaking activities were designed from more controlled activities to freer ones following what Diaz Maggioli and Painter-Farrell (2016 p. 329) say that tasks should “offer possible progression and sequencing that moves from more

simple to more demanding in terms of language output”. The participants were encouraged to work independently but they were also taught how to use technology and they could create their own activities for their learning first and then for their teaching practice, this made them act in an autonomous way, but also they felt confident by doing the activities out of the classroom and repeating them several times. They submitted the recordings with which they felt better and more confident. They were able to produce and practice the English speech sounds and sound patterns at their own pace. Oral skills, according to Nunan (2003), involve the organization of thoughts in a meaningful and logical sequence; select the appropriate words and sentences according to the social setting or audience, use language to express values and judgements and use the language quickly and confidently as a TSA for the participants.

The identification of the learners’ needs and the design of activities that could fulfill these needs allowed the participants to feel that the course could meet their personal goals and concerns making it more relevant and meaningful for them. As this does not usually happen in *top-down* courses imposed by authorities, which was the case of the original course, they expressed their satisfaction, which resulted in a more active participation when they realized that their needs were taken into account when planning the sessions. The participants felt they had been heard through the needs analysis process and in consequence they made an effort to comply with the tasks and the activities in and out of the classroom. Additionally, the participants showed a commitment to continue practicing on their own by using technology once the course finished. Hyland (2002) says that this is what distinguishes an ESP course from other approaches to English Language Teaching: the specific-learner-centered language instruction.

CONCLUSION

Placing the student in the center of instruction is one of the essential characteristics of ESP. The growth and spread of this kind of instruction may be a proof of the effectiveness of the ESP approach, especially in professional settings, as was the case for this in service-English teachers’ course. In a globalized world, where many people want to learn English, the emergence of ESP with its emphasis on needs analysis as the basis for designing instruction is an important factor in the development of more appropriate EFL language curriculum programs.

Teaching a course for junior high school English teachers was a big responsibility for the facilitator, the evaluation process that teachers were facing in the country added pressure to all participants as well as the decision made by their authorities who made them attend the course. However, the fact that “learners know specifically why they were learning a language” as Hutchinson and Waters, (1992, p 6) claimed, was an advantage for the students and the facilitator as they could express their concerns and needs through a needs analysis process. Then, a specific program that could complement the content of the course using technology tools to address their specific needs was made. Exposing teachers to virtual learning environments gave them the opportunity to practice feeling safe and willing to continue doing the activities in an autonomous way by feeling supported by scaffolding provided during the course in the new settings which have made English learning and

teaching easier by providing significant input, appropriate authentic materials and more interaction opportunities to learners. In the light of the previous discussion, it is important to highlight that ESP-oriented courses are potentially beneficial to improve the current situation in English Language Teaching (ELT) in the public educational sector. In the end, teachers could improve their speaking skills and the course turned into a more satisfying experience for both, facilitator and participants despite the fact that it was a top-down, imposed training course for most of the participants and what was more important, they showed their interest and commitment to keep learning on their own using the technological resources they used during the course.

ESP practitioners and the delivery of ESP courses may not be able to fully transform the teaching and learning of English in professional environments. However, ESP can be an alternative to better suit learners' needs and provide a better understanding of how to help learners meet their needs in academic and workplace contexts. By doing this, ESP courses might enable teachers, as this study has shown, to meet their own needs and expectations of teacher-training courses. Raising the teachers' awareness on their own learning and empowering them with tools to develop their autonomy, participants were expected to get involved in their own professional growth process in a more motivating way.

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