

Study on the Theoretical Foundation of Business English Curriculum Design Based on ESP and Needs Analysis

Wenzhong Zhu¹ & Dan Liu²

¹School of English for International Business, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou 510420, China

²School of Education, University of Nottingham, Wollaton Road, Nottingham, NG8 1BB, UK

Correspondence: Wenzhong Zhu, School of English for International Business, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou 510420, China. Tel: 86-20-3620-6599. E-mail: wenzhong8988@sina.com

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Abstract

Based on a review of the literature on ESP and needs analysis, this paper is intended to offer some theoretical supports and inspirations for BE instructors to develop BE curricula for business contexts. It discusses how the theory of need analysis can be used in Business English curriculum design, and proposes some principles of BE curriculum design, including objective principle, need principle, scientific principle, systematic principle and developmental principle, which will provide some references for the improvement of BE module curriculums.

Keywords: business English, ESP, need analysis, curriculum design

1. Introduction

Guangdong University of Foreign Studies has launched the programme of BE at both postgraduate and undergraduate level for more than ten years. However, based on our interviews with a large number of students who are graduates from and current students in School of English for International Business of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, China, it is found that many students are not satisfied with the present curriculum design they have received or are receiving. Besides, our previous study on the curriculum design in this college has also revealed that some improvement still needs to be made. Many people have put forward different curriculum designs for Business English. However, the theoretical support for Business English curriculum design has not yet been fully justified.

This paper includes the following several parts with an aim to offering some theoretical supports and inspirations for developing BE curricula. First, it gives a literature review of ESP from the aspects of origins, key notions, and characteristics. Second, it elaborates on the core developmental stage of ESP with the need analysis theory as the first stage of the curriculum design. In the third part, it talks about how this needs analysis can be used in Business English curriculum design. At last, some principles of BE curriculum design are put forward. It hopes that the research results of this paper should be able to provide some references for the improvement of BE module curriculums.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Origin of ESP

Certainly, a great deal about the origin of ESP could be written. Notably, there are three reasons common to the emergence of all ESP: such as the demands of a Brave New World, a revolution in linguistics, and focus on the learner (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) noted that two key historical periods breathed life into ESP. First, the end of the Second World War brought with it an "... age of enormous and unprecedented expansion in scientific, technical and economic activity on an international scale for various reasons, most notably the economic power of the United States in the post-war world, the role [of international language] fell to English" (p. 6). Second, the Oil Crisis of the early 1970s resulted in Western money and knowledge flowing into the oil-rich countries. The language of this knowledge became English.

The general effect of all this development was to exert pressure on the language teaching profession to deliver the required goods. Whereas English had previously decided its own destiny, it now became subject to the wishes, needs and demands of people other than language teachers (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p. 7).

The second key reason cited as having a tremendous impact on the emergence of ESP was a revolution in linguistics. Whereas traditional linguists set out to describe the features of language, revolutionary pioneers in linguistics began to focus on the ways in which language is used in real communication. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) pointed out that one significant discovery was in the ways that spoken and written English vary. In other words, given the particular context in which English is used, the variant of English will change. This idea was taken one step farther. If language in different situations varies, then tailoring language instruction to meet the needs of learners in specific contexts is also possible. Hence, in the late 1960s and the early 1970s, there were many attempts to describe English for Science and Technology (EST). Hutchinson and Waters (1987) identified Ewer and Latorre, Swales, Selinker and Trimble as a few of the prominent descriptive EST pioneers.

The final reason Hutchinson and Waters (1987) cite as having influenced the emergence of ESP has less to do with linguistics and everything to do psychology. Rather than simply focusing on the method of language delivery, more attention was given to the ways in which learners acquire language and the differences in the ways language is acquired. Learners were seen to employ different learning strategies, use different skills, enter with different learning schemata, and be motivated by different needs and interests. Therefore, focusing on the learners' needs became equally paramount as the methods employed to disseminate linguistic knowledge. Designing specific courses to better meet these individual needs was a natural extension of this thinking. To this day, the catchword in ESL circles is learner-centered or learning-centered.

2.2 Key Notions about ESP

In this discussion, four key notions will be discussed. They are as follows: a) the distinctions between the absolute and variable characteristics of ESP, b) types of ESP, c) characteristics of ESP courses, and d) the meaning of the word "special" in ESP.

Firstly, absolute and variable characteristics of ESP:

Ten years later, theorists Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) modified Strevens' original definition of ESP to form their own. Let us begin with Strevens. He defined ESP by identifying its absolute and variable characteristics. Strevens' (1988) definition makes a distinction between four absolute and two variable characteristics:

Absolute characteristics:

ESP consists of English language teaching which is:

- designed to meet specified needs of the learner;
- related in content (i.e. in its themes and topics) to particular disciplines, occupations and activities;
- centered on the language appropriate to those activities in syntax, lexis, discourse, semantics, etc., and analysis of this discourse;
- in contrast with General English.

Secondly, variable characteristics:

ESP may be, but is not necessarily:

- restricted as to the language skills to be learned (e.g. reading only);
- not taught according to any pre-ordained methodology (pp. 1-2).

Anthony (1997) notes that there has been considerable recent debate about what ESP means despite the fact that it is an approach which has been widely used over the last three decades. At a 1997 Japan Conference on ESP, Dudley-Evans offered a modified definition. The revised definition he and St. John postulate is as follows:

Absolute Characteristics

- ESP is defined to meet specific needs of the learner;
- ESP makes use of the underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves;
- ESP is centered on the language (grammar, lexis, register), skills, discourse and genres appropriate to these activities.

Variable Characteristics

- ESP may be related to or designed for specific disciplines;

- ESP may use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of general English;
- ESP is likely to be designed for adult learners, either at a tertiary level institution or in a professional work situation. It could, however, be for learners at secondary school level;
- ESP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students;
- Most ESP courses assume some basic knowledge of the language system, but it can be used with beginners (1998, pp. 4-5).

Dudley-Evans and St. John have removed the absolute characteristic that “ESP is in contrast with General English” and added more variable characteristics. They assert that ESP is not necessarily related to a specific discipline. Furthermore, ESP is likely to be used with adult learners although it could be used with young adults in a secondary school setting.

As for a broader definition of ESP, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) theorize, “ESP is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner’s reason for learning” (p. 19). Anthony (1997) notes that, it is not clear where ESP courses end and general English courses begin; numerous non-specialist ESL instructors use an ESP approach in that their syllabi are based on analysis of learner needs and their own personal specialist knowledge of using English for real communication.

2.3 Characteristics of ESP Courses

The characteristics of ESP courses identified by Carter (1983) are discussed here. He states that there are three features common to ESP courses: a) authentic material, b) purpose-related orientation, and c) self-direction.

If we revisit Dudley-Evans’ (1997) claim that ESP should be offered at an intermediate or advanced level, use of authentic learning materials is entirely feasible. Closer examination of ESP materials will follow; suffice it to say at this juncture that use of authentic content materials, modified or unmodified in form, are indeed a feature of ESP, particularly in self-directed study and research tasks. For Language Preparation for Employment in the Health Sciences, a large component of the student evaluation was based on an independent study assignment in which the learners were required to investigate and present an area of interest. The students were encouraged to conduct research using a variety of different resources, including the Internet.

Purpose-related orientation refers to the simulation of communicative tasks required of the target setting. Carter (1983) cites student simulation of a conference, involving the preparation of papers, reading, note taking, and writing. At Algonquin College, English for business courses have involved students in the design and presentation of a unique business venture, including market research, pamphlets and logo creation. The students have presented all final products to invited ESL classes during a poster presentation session. For our health science program, students attended a seminar on improving your listening skills. They practiced listening skills, such as listening with empathy, and then employed their newly acquired skills during a fieldtrip to a local community centre where they were partnered up with English-speaking residents.

Finally, self-direction is characteristic of ESP courses in that the “... point of including self-direction ... is that ESP is concerned with turning learners into users” (Carter, 1983, p. 134). In order for self-direction to occur, the learners must have a certain degree of freedom to decide when, what, and how they will study. Carter (1983) also adds that there must be a systematic attempt by teachers to teach the learners how to learn by teaching them about learning strategies. Is it necessary, though, to teach high-ability learners such as those enrolled in the health science program about learning strategies? I argue that it is not. Rather, what is essential for these learners is learning how to access information in a new culture.

In short, the view gains ground that the English needed by a particular group of learners could be identified by analyzing the linguistic characteristics of their specialist area of work or study. “Tell me what you need English for and I will tell you the English that you need” became the guiding principle of ESP.

New development in educational psychology also contributes to the rise of ESP, by emphasizing the central importance of the learners and their attitudes to learning. Learners are seen to have different needs and interests, which would have an important influence on their motivation to learn and therefore on the effectiveness of their learning. This lends support to the development of courses in which “relevance” to the learners’ needs and interests was paramount (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).

In recent years, researchers have made ongoing researches into the new development of business English as a sub-branch of ESP in China since the Ministry of Education approved business English as a formalized new discipline in 2007. The implication of business English in China has been broadened because it has evolved into a new discipline as a revolution in linguistics, and business English, as a comprehensive inter-discipline

developed from ESP, is now faced with some new developments in China in areas such as disciplinary development, course design, teaching approach, teaching staff development, and student evaluation system (Zhu et al., 2011).

3. Needs Analysis

As a branch of English language teaching (ELT), ESP has experienced the development of five stages, they are register analysis, rhetoric or discourse analysis, target situation analysis, skills and learning strategies and learning-centered stage (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, pp. 9-14). Needs analysis first made its appearance in the target situation analysis. At this stage, the ESP course designers first analyze the target situation of the learners, combining the learners with their language learning targets closely to meet different needs of different learners. When it has developed to the fifth stage, need analysis has taken an irreplaceable place in ELT, for it makes the teaching content compact and more focused. And it is commonly recognized that the first step of the procedure of BE curriculum design is a diagnosis of needs.

Target analysis refers to analyzing the needs of the students at the end of the course (Chambers, 1980). Target situation analysis or need analysis is the starting point and the center of ESP. John Munby made a clear and thorough explanation in his "*Communication Outline Design*". Munby (1978) pointed out in his need analysis model that to determine what learners learn, we must first analyze the types of communication needs of the learners. This is the basis for curriculum development. On the contrary, Richterich and Chancerel (1980, p. 80) raised the Present-Situation Analysis, in which he said, the analysis of learners' existing language proficiency and requirements and expectations of the next stage should be made before they start to learn their courses, with an aim to grasp information of their existing level of foreign language, professional knowledge, learning resources, and attitudes towards language teaching and so on.

"Target needs" raised by Hutchison and Waters in 1987 is something of an umbrella term, which in practice hides a number of important distinctions: necessities, lacks and wants. The "necessities" type of need determined by the demands of the target situation, that is, what the learner has to know in order to function effectively in the target situation. The learner's lacks refers to the gap between the target proficiency and the existing proficiency of the learners. Wants means the learners themselves also have a view as to what their needs are. As Richterich (1984, p. 29) comments: "... a need does not exist independent of a person. It is people who build their images of their needs on the basis of date relating to themselves and their environment."

The need analysis advocated by Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) provides a feasible framework for the curriculum design. In their views, need analysis can be broken down into three different angles of approach. First, is the target situation analysis, which is a way of starting from the curriculum designers from the perspective of macro-analysis of the requirements towards ESP teaching by a society or some certain industries. Second is the Learning-Situation Analysis, which requires curriculum designers focus on students, analyze the influence of their attitudes toward language teaching, their experiences and requirements on their language learning. The last is the Present-Situation Analysis, which requires teachers to focus on the student's current language level, their learning obstacles and gaps before they set curriculum, select teaching materials and teaching methods.

Although different scholars have different views on needs analysis, however it is commonly recognized that curriculum design should be based on investigation and analysis of the language used by learners in the target situation. And a careful and thorough analysis of that consist of Present-Situation Analysis and Target Situation Analysis (Robinson, 1991, pp. 8-9).

Needs analysis is the first stage of the curriculum design. Its ultimate goal is to obtain valid data, on which base to determine the teaching objective, teaching strategies and implement teaching activities, and finally meet the needs of students, improve teaching efficiency and realize the teaching goals.

4. Application of Needs Analysis in Business English Curriculum Design

Needs analysis should abide by the three principles of reliability, validity and availability, which are generally carried out in accordance with the following three steps, planning, collecting data and analyzing the obtained information (Yan, 2008, p. 98). Planning is of great importance to an effective needs analysis. Therefore, before carrying out research, we should make it clear what information is needed, why they are needed and how to obtain the necessary information. Then design questions and ways of seeking answers to these questions. Collecting data is the next step after planning. As the curriculum designers have already had a general understanding of the basic present situation of students, they will put more emphasis on the target situation analysis between the choice of present situation analysis and target situation analysis.

As the ultimate goal of most students of business English majors is to enter the foreign-related economic sectors, therefore, we should first analyze the needs and expectations of employers in or order to design a proper curriculum for business English major. To analyze the target situation of the employer, we can make surveys, interviews, and case studies.

In addition, to collect the required information and data, a series of procedures and instruments are needed, which include: (1) quantitative research, such as structured surveys and interviews, language survey of relevant staffs, data and information obtained through formal channels and government documents, dates obtained from questionnaires, testing, assessment and examination results and so on; (2) qualitative research, such as semi-structured interview, conversation, participant observation, case studies, formal seminars and so on. Qualitative research generally is used to determine the needs of the nature, while quantitative research is used to determine the scope of these needs. An ideal analysis of needs is a combination of this two to obtain different views and points from different channels.

After the data and information are collected, the next step is to analyze them, which is a significant process in the needs analysis. The questionnaires, interviews and testing are only a means to achieve the end, but they are not an end. Only after the detailed analysis of those information and data can we obtain the fundamental basis for curriculum design.

5. Principles of Business English Curriculum Design

5.1 Objective Principle

“*Syllabus for English Majors in Colleges and Institutions*” clearly pointed out that the talents cultivated by English major should be compound talents and made it a rule that three kinds of courses are required, English courses on professional skills, English courses on professional knowledge and relevant courses on professional knowledge. Thus, the curriculum design of the BE should be made under the principle of that Syllabus and must highlight those objectives and principles.

As for GDUFS, Professor John has put forward his dynamic 631 principle for curriculum design which consists of two phases:

Phase 1: (first 2 years)

- 6=GBE (to train basic skills): (Listening, speaking...)
- 3=Chinese factors: (business models)
- 1=Culture (business protocols...)

Phase 2

- 6=Business (in English)
- 3=English
- 1=Culture and internship

As for the first phase, there are several points should be focused. First, reinforcing English skills is very important, which takes 60 percent. It is a process of reinforcing English skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, for they are the basic tools for BE learning. Second, the foundation process for BE learning aims to get to know Chinese business factors (30%). They include China model of development, Beijing Consensus, Labor Law and Investment in China. Third, business concepts are established by using business content materials for English learning, such as business protocols and cultural knowledge (10%). Students in this phase should develop business skills such as presentation, telephoning corresponding, E-mail writing, report writing, negotiating and so on.

When it comes to the second phase, the 60% should be given to offering various business related courses to reinforce business knowledge, and 30% goes to enhance English comprehensive capability, and still 10% belongs to courses on cultural factors. Students in this phase are expected to develop business skills and entrepreneurial spirit.

- Reinforce business knowledge
 - Various business related courses
- Enhance English comprehensive capability
- Develop business skills and entrepreneurial spirit

5.2 Need Principle

As different regions have different economic situation and requires different talents. Moreover, different universities have different resources and thus require different curriculum designs. Therefore, each university should combine their own situation with the needs of the society and local situation.

5.3 Scientific Principle

Curriculum design must be based on a scientific basis. It should fully reflect the needs of society, and also follow the rules of curriculum design: from simple to complex, from basic to professional, from theory to practice, and also take teaching resources, teaching process into account to ensure the feasibility of the curriculum system. Besides, attention should be paid to the intrinsic link between different disciplines.

5.4 Systematic Principle

The compound features of BE requires curriculum design not only to follow the systems of knowledge in different areas, but also the integrated systems of these knowledge in different areas. A business English expert Bireger (1997) pointed out that the scope of business includes knowledge on English language, communication skills, professional knowledge, management skills and cultural awareness. Therefore, the complete system of business English curriculum should cover the following modules, such as language skills modules, business knowledge modules, cross-cultural communication and interpersonal communication modules. Each module consists of several core courses. All these programs complement each other and together to constitute the business English curriculum system with an aim to improving students' comprehensive ability in business communication.

5.5 Developmental Principle

Business English is not a static system. With the continuous development of international business, the range of application has been wider and wider. Thus, business English courses, in addition to the existing arrangements for both horizontal and vertical aspects of the curriculum, will involve more economic classes and other interdisciplinary areas of knowledge. Meanwhile, the social demand for talent is changing, learners' needs are changing, and higher education is changing. Therefore, the curriculum design of business English should be continuously adjusted and improved, forming a dynamic developmental model.

6. Conclusion

On the basis of insights gained from Professor John's lecture on theoretical study on BE, this paper firstly gives a literature review of ESP from the origins, key notions, and characteristics of ESP. Then, it elaborates the core developmental stages of ESP, with the need analysis as the first stage of the curriculum design. In the third part, it discusses how the theory of needs analysis can be used in Business English curriculum design. At last, the principles of BE curriculum designs are put forward as follows: such as objective principle, need principle, scientific principle, systematic principle and developmental principle. It is supposed to offer some theoretical support and some inspiration for developing BE curricula.

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