

ESP: How to design challenging tasks for adult learners

Elzbieta Jendrych, Halina Wisniewska

E-mail: jendrych@alk.edu.pl, haw@alk.edu.pl
Kozminski University (Poland)

Abstract

In English for Specific Purposes (ESP) meaningful and challenging tasks are an essential element of the teaching process. One of the main assumptions of ESP is that teaching materials should enable learners to acquire the variety of language and skills they will need in typical situations they meet in their professional life. There is specific vocabulary and language situations which are likely to appear and therefore ESP teachers integrate content with language teaching. They find themselves teaching not only the language skills but also professional skills: for instance in case of EFB they may cover assigning roles, planning strategies, communicating objectives, managing conflicts. That is why teaching ESP may in some cases be considered as teaching CLIL. As I. McGrath [1] notices "teaching for knowledge is very different from teaching for skill". There is a need for more content-led materials. Only some of the ready made materials available on the market can be used for teaching adult learners interested in language for a particular career.

The purpose of the presentation is to show practically how to design own tasks or adapt tasks in textbooks to make them more meaningful for learners and a valuable tool in active learning/teaching process which is the core principle of ESP.

Needs of ESP Adult Learners

Recent developments in English Language Teaching (ELT) that moved away from previous models are closely connected with the economic changes of the last decades, in particular the process of globalisation. The new approach to language teaching has been developed to meet the changing needs of learners. Nowadays English is necessary to operate effectively in a globalised world. There are innumerable definitions of globalisation because it is a multifaceted phenomenon. Globalisation is an umbrella term and is perhaps best understood as referring to a syndrome of related processes in the economic, social, technological, cultural, political and ecological spheres, whereby global connectivity, integration and interdependence are constantly increasing. Thanks to its numerous aspects globalisation creates various opportunities not only for countries but also for individuals. Globalisation of higher education and flexible labour market allow mobility of international students and workforce. To benefit from the new opportunities individuals must be equipped with higher-order skills required by the new economy. An individual needs flexibility, creativity, critical thinking skills. Another skill to acquire is proficiency in English.

The need for new skills has made governments rethink language educational policies. In reforms that are taking place in the education systems in many countries English is no longer regarded as one among several foreign languages individuals may wish to learn: new educational strategies aim specifically at improving national proficiency in English. To allow gaining fluency in this language, more and more countries are deciding to introduce it into school curricula from the beginning of primary education. In many places bilingual education has become very popular. One of the most promising approaches seems to be Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) launched in 1996. In this practice curriculum subjects are taught and learnt through the language that is not the

mother tongue. Learners acquire the subject content, the language and other practical skills e.g. problem solving at the same time. CLIL introduces natural language that is relevant to the learners and which is learnt by being used, it is a means of learning the content not the target in itself therefore assessment of language proficiency is closely connected with subject assessment.

It needs to be pointed out that a CLIL lesson is neither a language lesson in the traditional understanding, although it shares some aspects with current ELT approaches, nor a typical subject class as the level of language fluency of the learners may have an impact on the scope of the content. The idea of CLIL is to introduce a foreign language to learners at a very young age so that they can gain proficiency by the time they complete secondary school. At higher levels of education only more advanced subject-specific knowledge may be required. Yet, despite numerous advantages in terms of improving language proficiency and intercultural understanding CLIL will not, at least in the near future, be a solution to the growing need for more specific professional language skills. There are subjects that are not taught below the university level of education. What is more, global flexible labour market requires upgrading skills and qualifications throughout the professional career. There are and there will be learners who will need linguistic education after they graduate from school or university. There are opinions that teaching language for specific purposes is as a special form of CLIL but we believe that such a stance can be challenged as there are some significant differences between CLIL and ESP.

ESP is a term that covers both English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP). In case of EAP learners are not required to be familiar with the content of the discipline they study as they will acquire both the content and the language during the course. Therefore it seems more appropriate to regard it as CLIL. EOP, however, is for professional and vocational purposes and at least some knowledge related to the trade or occupation is required from learners. It is common that EOP courses are attended by in-service learners who know much more about the subject matter than the teacher. The main reason for attending such a course is learners' need to improve language skills within a certain discipline or area. The content which they are usually familiar with is necessary to elicit special lexical, grammatical and sometimes intercultural elements. In such a situation the teacher's role is to help them talk in English about the subjects they already know.

Secondly, ESP, in particular EOP, learners are usually adults and teaching adults requires a different methodology than teaching youths. Although there has been a lot of discussion in the field of adult education since 1970's when M. Knowles introduced his new concept that children and adults learn in a different way 'it is doubtful that a phenomenon as complex as adult learning will ever be explained by a single theory, model or a set of principles' [2]. In their book the authors presented their concept of adult learning in a form of the andragogical model. It is based on six core principles of andragogy :

1. *The need to know.* Adult learners need to know the purpose and the benefits of learning before they undertake the learning process. If they perceive them as valuable their motivation to learn increases;
2. *The learner's self-concept.* Adults have the need to be perceived as being responsible and capable of self-direction. They expect the teacher to guide them through the content of the course not to tell them what to do step by step;
3. *The role of learner's experience.* Undertaking the effort to learn something new adult learners already have knowledge and previous experience in many areas, certain learning style, certain expectations in terms of teaching style and methodologies;
4. *Readiness to learn.* Adults usually decide to start learning when they feel the need to upgrade skills or qualifications, to acquire new knowledge to be able to cope more effectively with real-life situations;
5. *Orientation to learning.* Adult learners are task-centred or problem-focused. They are particularly motivated if they can see the knowledge and skills they acquire can be applied practically in real-life situations;

6. *Motivation.* Adults are usually well motivated not only by extrinsic factors but also intrinsic ones e.g. satisfaction or self-esteem which can be very powerful motivators.

The andragogical model has practical implications for ESP teaching/learning techniques and designing tasks for adult learners:

- ESP students must be informed about the objectives of the course, its contents and teaching methods before the course starts, but they also need to know the aims of tasks they are to perform during the course.
- Emphasis should be put on individualised learning strategies. If possible the teacher should use their knowledge about the students' abilities, skills and preferable learning techniques when assigning roles to be performed in the tasks so that they best match learners' preferences.
- The most effective teaching techniques are the ones that draw on learners' own experience and knowledge e.g. group discussions, problem solving activities, case studies, group projects.
- Knowledge the learners are to gain has to be presented in the context that the learners are likely to deal with in real-life situations. Tasks should be cognitively demanding and require communicative behaviour that is typical for performing real-life language tasks.
- The teacher's role is to be a guide and an advisor in choosing appropriate lexical and grammatical elements, an allocator of tasks, an evaluator of task performance, provider of feedback and assessor of the outcome when tasks have been completed, a source of additional information if such is needed.

Designing tasks for ESP learners

In recent approaches to ELT language is regarded as a tool necessary for communication. The best way to develop fluency is to use it in real-life situations but 'classroom is unnatural by design' [3]. Inside the classroom only the closest possible context in which real-world tasks are transformed into pedagogical tasks can be created. Yet many traditional language exercises good for practising language accuracy are not good for developing the ability to use the language effectively in real-time communication. A tool that makes language teaching more communicative is a task. Tasks can be used to provide context for communication practice of language elements introduced by means of more traditional tools (task-supported teaching) or they can be the only way of introducing the new content (task-based teaching).

There are a lot of definitions of a task varying in scope and formulation but certain critical features can be distinguished :

- a task is a workplan;
- the main focus is on meaning;
- there is engagement in real-world language activities;
- engagement of cognitive processes is necessary;
- focus is on oral skills though involvement of any of the four language skills may be required;
- communicative outcome must be clearly defined .

Most of the above mentioned features appear in a definition provided by R. Ellis [4] who claims that: 'a task is a workplan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate propositional content has been conveyed. To this end, it requires them to give primary attention to the meaning and to make use of their own linguistic resources, although the design of the task may predispose them to choose particular forms. A task is intended to result in language use that bears a resemblance, direct or indirect, to the way language is used in the real world. Like other language activities, a task can engage productive or receptive, and oral or written skills, and also various cognitive processes'.

There are various classifications of tasks but two general types can be distinguished: unfocused tasks and focused tasks. The former type does not focus on any particular linguistic feature while the latter does e.g. on specific grammar construction or set of expressions. We believe that for adult ESP learners unfocused tasks are more authentic and therefore more challenging, as learners can decide about the task content and which forms from their linguistic repertoire to use. The two forms of unfocused tasks particularly liked by learners are case studies and group projects as they offer most opportunities to talk, discuss, exchange information, negotiate. The case study method has become an essential element in content-based teaching, particularly teaching English to advanced students. However, despite "a plethora of textbooks available on the market" [5] there are very few ready made materials offering context-specific texts and tasks suitable for ESP adult learners.

When it comes to case studies textbooks usually offer cases related to the topic covered in the unit and include activities that allow to meet the objectives of this unit e.g. they are targeted at practising a certain skill or vocabulary. Such cases are often focused tasks, open to interpretation which may be interesting for pre-service learners for whom the carrier content is less important than the real content.

Adult ESP learners, particularly those in service attending highly job-specific courses, may find them cognitively unchallenging. Job experienced learners are more pragmatic. They bring business knowledge and skills to language learning situation and are looking for an opportunity to put this knowledge into practice when engaging in the activity. Cases in which neither students' experience nor coming up with a particular solution is required are simply not authentic enough. To cater for the needs of more experienced or linguistically advanced students the teacher may want to make such tasks more content-led. In ESP adaptation of the teaching materials is necessary. It may require e.g. supplementing, expanding, personalizing, modifying cultural or situational content. Supplementation is possible by utilizing items such as exercises, texts or activities from another published source or by devising your own tasks.

Using published materials for supplementation is easier and less time-consuming, yet various limitations and copyright issues may arise. Sometimes appropriate supplement material may simply be unavailable. Devising one's own material seems to be the better though more challenging option. as designing a task requires:

1. defining learners' language learning needs, relevant situations for language use and language tasks relevant to these situations;
2. defining the outcome and deciding on the type of a task (focused or unfocused);
3. choosing the thematic content to match learners' needs;
4. choosing the carrier content that is most authentic for learners and best matches their knowledge, experience and expectations;
5. providing input adequate to learners' language proficiency and knowledge of the topic;
6. making the task activities as close to target tasks as possible;
7. making the task activities cognitively demanding and drawing on learners' knowledge and experience.

It is still worth the effort as materials prepared by teachers are more likely to meet the objectives of the target group, they are more relevant to students' needs and interests.

In recent years designing challenging and interesting tasks has become easier thanks to the unprecedented increase in the role of ICT in language teaching. Schrooten [6] lists some of its potentials:

1. ICT allows a high degree of differentiation. Individual needs and abilities can easily be accommodated.
2. Working with ICT elicits a high degree of learner motivation and involvement.
3. ICT offers enriched content and allows a more intense, multisensory learning process.

4. ICT makes teaching more efficient, since the teacher can focus more on supporting learners rather than having to focus on providing content.

Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) allows teachers to design tasks that are intellectually challenging and make learners engaged and interested in completing them. As Ellis [7] notices 'a task can only be said to have worked if the students find it enjoyable and/or useful'. An additional advantage of CALL is that tasks can be completed at any moment (within the time limit set by the teacher) convenient for the learner. This is particularly important for adult learners as they can work outside the classroom. One of the tasks that are easier to perform when new technology can be used is a group project. This is a collaborative task in which learners can decide about the content, linguistic forms that they will use, the performance options. Students enjoy interacting with peers and willingly engage in meaningful communication. But completing a complex task of this kind requires a lot of time, therefore it is seldom chosen by language teachers. With the use of CALL time spent on the task in the classroom can be significantly reduced.

Conclusion

In teaching ESP well designed, meaningful tasks are an invaluable tool. Yet, a task has not only strong points but also disadvantages, as do all learning tools. One of them is the unpredictability of the task output, which depends on a number of variables particularly in case of tasks performed collaboratively. Task outcome may not match the workplan set by the teacher. The final effect of learning activities is highly affected by the learners' engagement in the task which Breen [8] refers to as 'achievement' or 'survival orientation'. The teacher can only create opportunities for developing communicative fluency. Ellis [9] proposes eight principles that may help to achieve the goal:

1. Ensure an appropriate level of difficulty;
2. Establish clear goals for each task-based lesson;
3. Develop an appropriate orientation to performing the task in the students;
4. Ensure that students adopt an active role in task-based lesson;
5. Encourage students to take risks to 'stretch' their interlanguage resource;
6. Ensure that students are primarily focused on meaning when they perform a task;
7. Provide opportunities for focusing on form;
8. Require students to evaluate their performance and progress.

References

- [1] McGrath, I. (2002). *Materials Evaluation and Design for language Teaching*,(p.98). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- [2] Knowles, M.S., Holton, E.F., Swanson, R.A., (2005). *The Adult Learner*, 6th ed.,(p.1). Elsevier.
- [3] Nunan, D. (2005). *Task-Based language Teaching*. Cambridge: CUP.
- [4] Ellis, R. (2003). *Task-Based Language Learning and Teaching*,(p.16). Oxford: OUP.
- [5] Cunningsworth, A. (1984). *Evaluating and Selecting EFL Teaching Materials*. London:Heinemann.
- [6] Schrooten, W. (2006). Task-based language teaching and ICT: Developing and assessing interactive multimedia for task-based language teaching. In K. Van den Branden (ed) *Task-Based Language*, (p.129).Cambridge: CUP
- [7] Ellis, R. (2003). *Task-Based Language Learning and Teaching*,(p.324) . Oxford: OUP.
- [8] Breen, M. (1987). Learner contribution to task design. In C. Candlin & D. Murphy (eds.), *Language Learning Tasks* (pp. 23-46). London: Prentice Hall.
- [9] Ellis, R. (2003). *Task-Based Language Learning and Teaching*,(p.276). Oxford: OUP.