

A PROJECT IN ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES:
ENGLISH IN THE SERVICE OF INTERNATIONAL FOOD PRODUCTION

Ronald Mackay
Director, R & D Unit
CELE, UNAM
Now at TESL Centre
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec

Laura Cao-Romero
Head of Languages Department
FMVZ,
National Autonomous University
of Mexico

1. Introduction

In this article we will describe the rationale and procedural steps involved in the mounting and executing of a special purpose English language project which might act as a model for teachers or course designers faced with a similar task.

2. Background

This project was one of several resulting from the establishment of a co-operative link between the Centre for the Teaching of Foreign Language (CELE), National Autonomous University of Mexico and the Department of (Applied) Linguistics, the University of Edinburgh and financed jointly by the Mexican and British Governments. This specific project, begun in March 1975, had three distinct, though related purposes: (i) to develop and test materials intended to provide students with English language skills as a tool in their academic/professional studies (ii) to document the progress and stages of the project so that the procedures followed could, possibly in a modified form, be used as a model upon which other projects with similar purposes could pattern themselves (iii) to train local personnel at every stage of the project to build up in UNAM a cadre of well-qualified and experienced applied linguists.

It was decided by CELE to carry out the first ESP project in UNAM in conjunction with the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine and Animal production (FMVS) because of the enthusiastic support

for the project by the Dean and his staff. Moreover, the role played by the RWZ (and those in other Mexican universities) in food production in Mexico is of enormous importance. It was therefore felt that besides functioning within a suitable environment, the project would be meeting real needs in an important area contributing to the development of Mexico and thus justifying the time, effort and expense involved.

3. Operational model for the total ESP situation

The team selected to work on the RWZ project, followed a working model for an ESP project:

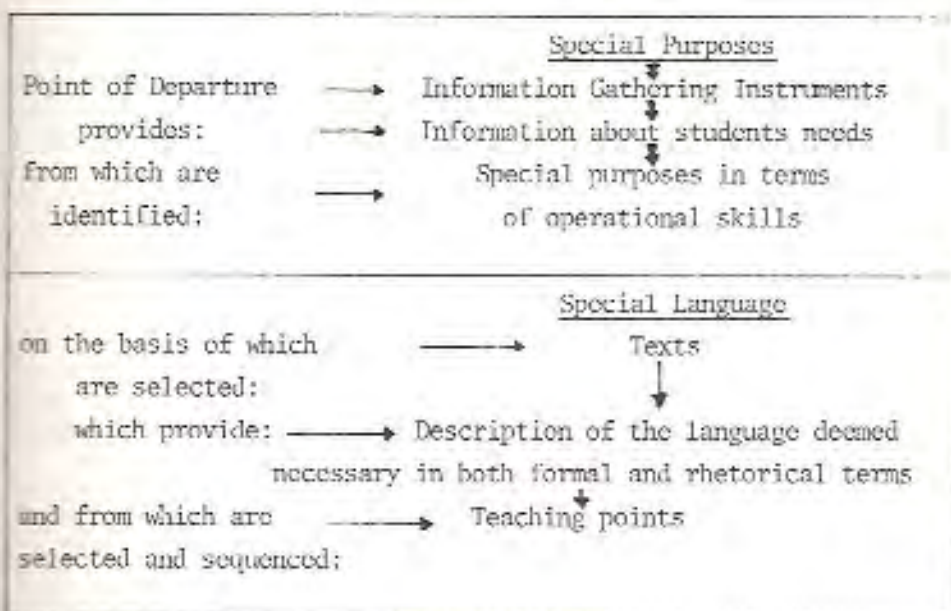


Fig. 1 The operational model of the total ESP situation
(Mackay and Klassen 1976)

4. Information Gathering: Students needs

Experience indicated that an erroneous but common point departure for ESP projects is the "Special Language", the "Special Purposes" being assumed wrongly to be either self-evident or already familiar to those involved in the project. The team felt that there was sufficient disagreement among the opinions of those

who were "already familiar" with the students needs to warrant a close investigation of these needs and a clarification of the factors involved.

Initial examination of purported needs amply demonstrated that there was inadequate distinction made between "current real needs", "future real needs" and "future hypothetical needs". Another category of "need" which tended to add to the confusion was that "posed" by a well-meaning teacher which reflected teacher desires for certain kinds of instruction independent of any identifiable need on the part of the students.

An exhaustive questionnaire was prepared for both the subject-matter teachers and the students in the EMVA. Experience had shown the inadequacy of information gathering instruments which were left to the students to complete; they were returned with the answers to some questions left blank, misunderstanding of questions was obvious from conflicting answers, and anomalous answers were difficult or impossible to follow up. It was therefore decided that the questionnaire should be conducted as a structured interview in which a trained interviewer would put the questions directly to a faculty member or student being interviewed and note his answers. In this way, deficiencies inherent in the type of questionnaire mentioned above could be overcome.

The structured interview was conducted individually with 42 professors and 52 students representing every field of study and every semester in the undergraduate degree in the EMVZ. The results provided us with a clear picture of the needs of the students as represented by both the staff and student body. In essence, the results indicated that a knowledge of no language other than Spanish was necessary for a student to complete his undergraduate studies satisfactorily. However, it was felt by 78% of the faculty and 58% of the students interviewed that a reading knowledge of English would permit students to increase the quality of their academic and professional knowledge significantly. No skill other than a reading skill emerged as a need.

5. Selecting suitable texts

We then conducted a series of classes in which the variables "intended readership of text", "students' familiarity with the propositional content of the text" and "relationship (i.e. similarity/dissimilarity) of the teaching texts to the target texts" were

examined. It was discovered that the intended readership of the text should coincide with the student readership, that the informational content of the text should be partly familiar, but should expand upon the students' existing knowledge of the subject and that teaching texts should be target texts. Clearly different results would be obtained for groups of students in different circumstances.

6. Identifying teaching points

Two attempts to identify "reading difficulties" of Spanish-speaking students reading English were made. One used the Cloze and modified Cloze techniques and the other used translation. These experiments are still in progress. Until the results of such work can provide us with objectively arrived at teaching points, our selection must inevitably be based on informed intuition and observation.

7. Creating exercise types

The exercise types used to practice the teaching point were also arrived at as a result of prior experience and familiarity with successful practices. Our observations and feedback from teachers using the materials did permit us to sequence the exercise types within any instructional unit to lead to optimal learning on the part of the student.

8. Evaluating the new programme

Finally, the materials and course of instruction which lasted 1 term (70 hours approx.) were evaluated in terms of student performance. Briefly, it was found that (i) the drop-out rate for students using the new material was 4% as opposed to almost 50% using traditional materials in CELE (ii) 94% of the students showed improvement in reading comprehension over the period of the course.

The materials are now being used with about 500 students in the FMZ annually.

9. Conclusions

Our conclusions to date are that a carefully planned ISP programme can contribute effectively to a given learning situation but a great deal of very basic research is still required in order to permit all the procedural steps to be decided upon objectively.

REFERENCE:

Mackay, R. and Klasson, B. Workshop on E.S.P., TESOL Annual Convention, New York, Spring, 1976. (mimeo) and reproduced in Mackay, R. and Cao-Romero, L.

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