

Challenges of an ESP course design for Romanian law enforcement students

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Abstract

This paper aims at showing what the challenges of an ESP course design developed for law enforcement students at the Police Academy in Romania have been. The law enforcement course book has been the result of a thorough process of identifying the students' needs and its goal has been to cover as many police-related topics and also to integrate activities tailored to the students' need to practice all English language skills.

Keywords: ESP course design, law enforcement students, learners' needs, English language skills, task-based learning

Introduction

To begin with the concept of ESP (English for Specific Purposes) is a branch of EFL/ESL (English as a Foreign/Second Language) system, which functions as the main branch of ELT (English Language Teaching). ESP can be further divided into two main sub-branches, which are EAP (English for Academic Purposes) and EOP (English for Occupational Purposes). On the other hand, English for Law Enforcement (which will be the focus of our study) is a variety of ESP, encompassed by EOP.

According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987) ESP is a more focused approach to language learning, whereby the content and method are based on the learner's particular needs to learn the language. Therefore, the process of planning and designing an appropriate course that meets the needs of an ESP target group (in our case, law enforcement students) is a rather challenging one due to the complexities of such an approach, which requires that extreme attention be paid to various facets of the language learning process so as to meet the specific English language needs of the target group and produce a learner-centred course.

With the course for law enforcement students, for instance, we have taken into consideration their English language proficiency, their language learning styles (focusing on the language learning skills they need to improve or practice more so as to help them in the language acquisition process), the most important topic areas of their concern, the police-related contexts they will be using English in.

Context

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First and foremost, it is essential that some clarifications be made about the institution in charge with the training of the future police officers. In Romania, this is the responsibility of „Al. I. Cuza” Police Academy in Bucharest, which is a state budgeted higher education institution, part of the national academic system and subordinated to The Ministry of Home Affairs, as sole beneficiary of the graduates trained in the three constituting faculties (Police Faculty, Firefighters Faculty and Archives Faculty) for the future careers of police officer, border police officer, penitentiary officer, gendarmes, firefighter officer and archivist.

As to the students enrolled in the Police Faculty (which is the focus of our study), who are being trained in the Bachelor's degree field called “Public order and national security”, they will undertake further specialization in various areas of policing such as criminal investigations, fraud and financial crime investigation, countering organized crime, forensics, traffic police, public order, transport police etc. Therefore, due to the students' specialized training within the academy, the need arises to adjust the approach of their foreign language syllabus (we shall make reference to English language in particular) so as not only to facilitate the acquisition of specialized law enforcement vocabulary, but also practice and develop English language skills.

On the other hand, most of the police academy students that attend English classes have an advanced language competence, as they have to pass a rather high-level English language test when taking the admission examination to the academy. For this reason, attention should be paid both to the level of difficulty of the course unit tasks and the content of the law enforcement English language course.

Needs Analysis

The content of an ESP course should only be determined by a thorough needs analysis as this is seen as being an absolutely essential first step before designing an ESP course, if the course developers aim to design a course that will maximally benefit their learners (Wright, 2001). When designing an ESP course, needs analysis is an inherent stage of great importance the course developer has to carry out. In the literature, needs analysis has been viewed as a process needed to determine the specific reasons for learning the language (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987) or as a process of determining the needs for which a learner or group of learners requires a language and arranging the needs according to priorities (Richards and Platt, 1992, p. 242). Other views consider needs analysis as the means to specify exactly what students/learners need to achieve through English (Robinson, 1991) or the techniques and procedures for collecting information to be used in syllabus design (Nunan, 1988, p. 13).

On the one hand, there are *learner or the target group needs*, which are typically interpreted both as what the learner *wants* to do with the language (*goal-oriented* definition) which relates to course objectives or the end of learning and what the learner *needs* to do to actually acquire the language (*a process-oriented* definition) which relates to the means of learning. In ESP contexts both interpretations are usually taken into consideration as both language learning goals and process are of outmost importance. Therefore, before designing the course, the ESP

teacher should find out why the students are taking the course and how they will use the learning. Moreover, the course developer should know exactly what kinds of tasks and activities require learners to employ English. For instance, what kind of real-life job scenarios impose the use of English (Kandil, 2003).

According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p. 59) there is a set of questions the course developer might use to discover relevant information: Why is the language needed?; How will the language be used?; What will the content areas be?; Who will the learners use the language with?; When/Where will the language be used?

On the other hand, we can talk of the *learning needs*, which may refer to the learners' language difficulties, their learning objectives or their learning styles etc. Jolly and Bolitho (1998) suggest that in order to understand what are the target group's or students' learning needs, the ESP course developer needs to answer the following questions: Why are the learners taking the course?; How do the learners learn?; What resources are available?; Who are the learners?; When/Where will the course take place?

However, in the literature of needs analysis there are other relevant perspectives to be carefully analysed before designing an ESP course. Thus, Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998, p. 145) discuss criteria for ESP course design and formulate a series of questions to be considered by the course developer such as: Should the course be intensive or extensive?; Should the learners' performance be assessed or non-assessed?; Should the course deal with immediate needs or with delayed needs?; Should the role of the teacher be that of the provider of knowledge and activities, or should it be as facilitator of activities arising from learners expressed wants?; Should the course have a broad focus or narrow focus?; Should the course be pre-study or pre-experience or run parallel with the study or experience?; Should the materials be common-core or specific to learners study or work?; Should the group taking the course be homogenous or should it be heterogeneous?; Should the course design be worked out by the language teacher after consultation with the learners and the institution, or should it be subject to a process of negotiation with the learners?

Therefore, designing an ESP course has to be a learner-oriented approach, as satisfying learners' needs has an important influence on their motivation and, subsequently, on their achievements. In addition, undertaking such an approach will allow the target group population to participate in the syllabus design, as they are more aware of their own professional context, the tasks or activities they need to use English in.

Irrespective of the questions the ESP course designer takes into consideration before starting to develop the language course, the outcomes of a needs analysis will not be absolute, but relative, as there are a number of factors that could affect its results such as the people asked; the questions employed and the interpretation of their responses (Dudley-Evans and St. John, 1998).

Another essential step in the needs analysis process is the *information gathering*, which can be done by employing the following methods alternatively or, for a more reliable needs analysis, a combination of these might be

used: a) questionnaires, which allow the course designer to determine the learners' purpose for learning the language (Nunan, 1989); b) authentic data analysis that might be employed to determine the features of the genre of the text required for the ESP context; c) interviews; and d) observation.

As far as our initiative of designing an English language course for law enforcement students is concerned, the needs analysis stage was conducted based on the use of a combination of procedures such as: a) *interviews* with both police academy students and representatives of The General Police Inspectorate, which is the main beneficiary of the Police Academy graduates, the future police officers, who will be employed in the units of The Romanian Ministry of Internal Affairs. As a result of these interviews we have jointly decided what the most relevant topic areas that the police academy students need to become familiar with in terms of police-related specific terminology are. Moreover, this method associated with the *questionnaires* administered to students shed more light upon their needs in terms of the development or improvement of the language learning skills, functional language, lexis, or grammatical structures; and b) *observation*: Having taught English at the Police Academy for a considerable number of years, I had the opportunity of becoming familiar with the culture of a police organization, which further allowed me to draw some conclusions about what can constitute the English language needs of my students as concerns police vocabulary or topics of interest. In addition, observation contributed with more information about the students' learning styles, the methodological approaches, the types of tasks or activities they prefer.

Apart from these procedures, as it is a common fact in the ESP course design literature that one of the most important steps is to determine the students' language level, we administered placement tests to the students at the beginning of the first year of study at the academy. Nevertheless, the students' general English language proficiency is established prior to their enrolment as police academy students by means of a foreign language test at the entrance examination. The language test is usually an advanced level test and its results provide relevant information as to what the candidates' language level is. However, the drawbacks of this test are that, on the one hand, it does not give any hint of the candidates' communicative competence and, on the other hand, the groups of students are not homogeneous as language level is concerned. Notwithstanding, the test gives sufficient input about the students' language level, which is more often than not upper intermediate to advanced, and this can be retested by means of a subsequent placement test.

Mainly, the needs analysis revealed that there is an imperative need of the police academy students to acquire specific vocabulary related to the various strands of policing, to develop and improve their both productive and receptive skills, as well as be able to use English in real-life job-related scenarios.

Course Objectives

In the light of the findings revealed by the needs analysis and the consideration of the police academy context, a set of general objectives was formulated for the English language course addressed to the law enforcement students.

At the end of the course, the learners will be able to:

- use appropriate vocabulary and grammatical structures in given situations
- identify and use task-related vocabulary
- skim relevant texts for content and meaning, and scan them for specific information
- use appropriate language and skills while interpreting role-plays
- make critical judgements about police-related situations according to their own experiences
- write different police-related types of reports
- describe various police equipment components, organizations or situations
- express a variety of language functions in both speaking and writing
- use discourse markers to produce cohesive communications etc.

Syllabus

Choosing course content

As a result of the needs analysis, we were able to decide together with the beneficiaries upon the most relevant broad topic areas the future police officers should be taught in a course addressed to law enforcement professionals. These broad topic areas were converted into 14 units, which were further organized in main sub-topics, as in the table below. The units were arranged in an easy-to-follow sequence, from general to more specific topics such as: *police organisation and ranks, police career and training, police uniform and equipment, law enforcement weapons and vehicles, police ethics, police powers and procedures, police duties and responsibilities, types of crimes and criminals, punishments and the prison system, police investigations, international police cooperation, police force and the media* etc. The table below shows a sample of how the unit topics and sub-topics were organised.

Table 1 English for Law Enforcement. Course Content Sample¹.

Units/Topics	Sub-topics
POLICE CAREER AND TRAINING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is a police officer? • A Police Officer's Selection, Education and Training (Romania, UK and US compared) • Police Recruitment Application Form • Police Recruitment Interview • A Police Officer's Oath of Allegiance
LAW ENFORCEMENT WEAPONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Handgun Components - Components of a Glock Pistol • Handgun Shooting Tips • Types of Police Weapons: Firearms, Less Lethal Weapons, Specialised Weapons, Body Armour • Handgun Shooting Positions and Techniques • Police Use of Firearms

As far as the *vocabulary* is concerned, the course allows attendants to acquire general and semi-technical police vocabulary related to the most relevant policing matters (as mentioned above). Moreover, the lexical component of the course will focus on unknown vocabulary specific to police tasks/activities, spelling, word formation, phrasal verbs, compound nouns etc.

The course aims to familiarize law enforcement students with *language functions* by giving them the opportunity to practice: expressing opinions, arguing/bringing arguments, agreeing or disagreeing, explaining situations, contrasting and comparing situations, describing people/situations/equipment,

¹ Cristina Pielmu (2012). English for Policing Purposes. An English language course book for law enforcement students and professionals, Sitech Publishing House, pp.6-10

summarizing, giving detailed information, making suggestions, speculating, justifying, giving instructions/orders etc. These functions can operate as course objectives and can be added to the above list of general objectives.

Moreover, the law enforcement students should be able to use all *grammatical structures* with a considerable degree of accuracy as they usually fit the upper-intermediate to advanced learner profile.

Selecting syllabus framework

Among theorists it has been argued that “task” represents the basis of syllabus design in second language acquisition (Richards, 2001, p.161) and tasks function as a vehicle of presenting suitable target language models (Long and Crookes, 1991, p.43). Embracing such a postulate and the belief that an ESP course is a learning-centred approach, while bearing in mind the results of the needs analysis stage, we have designed a task-based English language course for law enforcement students and professionals, oriented primarily on the development and improvement of the students’ language learning skills with a closer focus on the communicative competence.

Thus, the course tasks have been designed to serve as a means to practise all four skills: speaking, reading, listening and writing. In addition, the course included mainly two types of tasks: *pedagogical* and *real-world*. *Pedagogical tasks* are specially designed classroom tasks that are intended to require the use of specific interactional strategies and may also require the use of specific types of language (skills, grammar, vocabulary), whereas *real-world tasks* are tasks that reflect real-world uses of language and which might be considered a rehearsal for real-world tasks. Among the first category of tasks the course includes: filling in the gaps, matching words with their definitions, pairing words into collocations, answering comprehension questions/multiple choice questions/true-false questions/short answer questions, expressing opinions, contrasting and comparing things/situations, translating words/sentences/short texts, brainstorming, word formation tasks, solving crossword-puzzles, finding synonyms/antonyms etc. The category of real-world tasks encompasses activities such as: interpreting role plays (police officer recruitment interview, enforcing police powers and procedures, executing an arrest warrant, carrying out an intimate/vehicle search or a crime scene examination etc.), writing a police job application form/ a police report (incident/crime scene report)/ an action plan/a crime scene investigation report/ a media release, designing a police recruitment campaign poster, problem-solving, filling in a suspect’s description form etc.

Structuring instructional blocks

An ESP syllabus is inherently organized on certain criteria which allow the amount of knowledge to be learnt to be arranged into manageable units. Thus, Hutchinson and Waters (1987, pp. 85-89) show that there is an array of syllabi an ESP course could follow such as: topic, structural/situational, functional/notional, skills or task-based syllabus. However, any teaching materials may be designed according to several of the above syllabi, one of them

operating as the main organizing criterion, while the others may function simultaneously. All coursebooks contain texts, which are about particular topics, that is why an ESP course will automatically have a general topic syllabus. Moreover, the need to make students practice the language imposes the use of tasks based on language processing skills and for this reason the course will also be focused on this way of structuring the teaching materials.

When designing the English language course for law enforcement students and professionals we have considered the above-mentioned criteria. Furthermore, by breaking down the topic-centred units into task-based activities, we have organized the teaching materials around tasks focused also on skills development.

Thus, the coursebook units usually fit the following pattern:

Speaking input: At the beginning of the instructional sequence there are usually unit topic-related questions (asking for opinion, discussing topic-related concepts, contrast and compare facts/situations) or topic-related visual input used as a starter for discussion or brainstorming new vocabulary. On the other hand, at the end of the instructional block, when specific vocabulary has already been introduced and practiced through various vocabulary tasks, then speaking practice can be carried out through *role-plays* (e.g. police recruitment interview, tasks performed by a police officer on a patrol job, carrying out police procedures such as asking for people's IDs, stop and search, arrest and detention, interviewing witnesses or interrogating suspects etc.).

Reading input: usually followed by tasks such as: discussion, answering comprehension/multiple choice or true-false questions, inferring meaning from context, , finding the gist or specific information, organizing new vocabulary in categories/diagrams/charts, matching pictures with paragraphs, etc.

Vocabulary practice tasks: finding synonyms or antonyms for specific vocabulary items, filling in vocabulary diagrams, translation of specific words or phrases, word-formation or gap-fill exercises, finding collocations with key-words, filling in word puzzles, matching word with definition etc.

Writing tasks: e.g. filling in a suspect's description form, a police recruitment application form or a police report, a crime scene investigation report, writing a police media release, filling in a victim/witness statement etc. Some other writing tasks included in the coursebook involved carrying out *project-works*, focused, for instance, on designing a poster for a police officer recruitment campaign, for combating drug abuse among teenagers or fighting corruption in police force etc.

Listening input: usually followed by one or more of the following tasks: comprehension/multiple choice/true-false questions, discussion, fill-in exercises etc.

Materials

When it comes to designing ESP teaching materials, after the steps of needs analysis and syllabus outline have been completed, there are three possible alternatives an ESP teacher or developer may choose from: *materials*

evaluation, which means to select from existing materials; *materials development*, which refers to the teacher's option of writing his/her own materials and *materials adaptation*, whereby the existing materials are subject to alteration or adjustment (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987, p.96).

As for the process of designing our English language course for law enforcement, we resorted primarily to materials development and secondly to materials adaptation. But, since the materials adaptation implies actually the prior two processes, that means we eventually made use of all the options available to turn the ESP syllabus into teaching materials. Nevertheless, the materials development was the main option that covered an extensive amount of the final law enforcement teaching materials and this was due to the lack of prior English teaching materials designed for the field of law enforcement.

For this reason, the materials included in the course were carefully collected from a wide array of authentic sources, both written and visual, in order to fit the topic areas relevant for the students' lexical needs as they had been identified by the needs analysis. Then the materials went through a thorough process of selection at the end of which only those texts that adequately met the course objectives were kept. Therefore, the course for law enforcement students and professionals is the result of an extensive process of documentation and selection of police-specific resources followed by the development of English language learning activities.

As Hutchinson and Waters (1987, pp.107-108) show there are certain guidelines that can orient an ESP course developer, some of which we also attempted to cover in our own course design process: materials have to give students a stimulus to learning by suggesting interesting texts and enjoyable activities; materials organize the teaching-learning process by a clear and coherent unit structure and, last but not least, materials should provide models of correct and appropriate language.

Evaluation

When it comes to ESP teaching, there are two levels of evaluation, which we are about to discuss in the following paragraphs.

Learner assessment

Every course manager will eventually conduct the learners' assessment. This can be carried out at the beginning, at the end or throughout the course and it gives information to the teachers of how the aims of the course have been met and on how much teaching is still needed.

Learner assessment can take 3 forms such as:

- 1) *Placement tests* are usually used to "place" a student into a particular language level and are administered at the beginning of the course.

2) *Achievement tests* assess how well the learner has acquired the subject matter included in the syllabus and it is commonly taken any time through the course. In other words, an achievement test determines whether course objectives have been met (with skills acquired) by the end of a period of instruction.

3) *Proficiency tests* have the purpose of assessing the students' global competence in a foreign language and are administered to test if the students can meet the requirements of a specific situation.

All these tests can also function as diagnostic tests, which means that they can determine potential weaknesses learners might have.

In order to assess the students who attended the course for law enforcement purposes, we usually used achievement and proficiency tests. As a rule, the foreign language entrance examination test at the Police Academy functions as a placement test, which is an advanced level grammar examination. The achievement tests take the form of written and oral semester and yearly tests, which mainly assess the acquisition of police and legal vocabulary and the students' ability to communicate effectively on police-related topics or in police officer's job situations. Whereas the proficiency test at the Police Academy is a pass-fail, standardized test administered at the end of the academic cycle. Its aim is to assess students' general competence in English for law enforcement.

Course evaluation

An ESP course has to demonstrate that it meets the educational need which it was designed for in the first place. To put it differently, it has to show that it is justified in its present form. Course evaluation usually reveals how well the course objectives are met (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p. 152).

The purpose of the course evaluation is to gather relevant information about the parts of the course that may need some revision or clarification. It may also give ESP teachers an idea about those course objectives that have not been fulfilled so as further necessary adjustments to the course syllabus could be made.

An ESP course can be evaluated by using one or more of the following techniques (Hutchinson & Waters, pp. 153-154): test results, questionnaires, discussions; interviews or informal methods (conversations, comments etc.). As for those that are involved in the course evaluation process, they are usually the parties closely concerned with the ESP course, namely the ESP teachers, the learners and the sponsors or the beneficiaries. All these categories of persons could provide useful information about what needs to be improved or modified in the ESP course so that its aims be met or how well the ESP course prepared the learners for the target situations they are in at present. Moreover, the course evaluation may be conducted at any time, but the most valuable and recommended moments are usually the end of the course or, if possible, after the course, as in such cases the former students can offer insightful feedback on how the course helped them in their real-life police officer's job-related situations.

As for the evaluation of the English language course for law enforcement students we have designed, we resorted to discussions with peers and feedback questionnaires administered to Police Academy students who

attended the course in order to extract valuable information about the extent to which the course prepared them for real-life situations they would be facing as police officers. In addition, the results of both the achievement and proficiency tests have provided input on how well the students acquired the specialized terminology of the policing field and the degree to which they are able to cope with police-related communicative tasks.

As a complement, we will be considering using also video-recordings of classroom teaching as a means of course evaluation. Watching video-taped classroom practice provides the teacher a good chance to listen to his or her own instruction as the learners do and observe their reactions and responses simultaneously, which will help the teacher more easily obtain some objective viewpoints and comprehensive perception of the aspects needing modification and adjustment (Davis, 1993). The positive aspect of making video recordings is storing both verbal and nonverbal information for peer evaluation and course evaluation, avoiding interruption and facilitating fluency (Westerfield, 1989).

Conclusions

The process of designing an ESP course for law enforcement professionals is indeed a challenging one. This is a task that requires an experienced teacher with considerable ESP teaching and materials development practice. Only a teacher with a long-lasting career can live up to such a challenge, which an ESP course design proves to be.

First and foremost, an ESP course designer should be able to adequately go through all the steps involved in the designing process. Thus, when designing the English language course for the Police Academy students, we have learned that it is of paramount importance to accurately identify learners' learning needs in order to develop proper teaching materials to meet them. This stage is usually followed by others such as drafting the course objectives, outlining the syllabus framework based on the teaching theory the ESP course developer embraces, then evaluating, adapting or developing course materials and ending with the learners' assessment and course evaluation.

An educational environment such as the one at the Police Academy, where the students are trained for the police officer's profession, required a foreign language syllabus adjusted to the students' specializations in all policing branches. English language makes no exception. Thus the English language syllabus had to be tailored so as to meet the students' need to learn the specialized terminology in English and be able to use English in specific police contexts. When outlining the English language course for law enforcement professionals, attention has also been paid to structuring materials around tasks meant to develop all productive and receptive language skills such as speaking, listening, reading and writing.

To sum up, an ESP course design is an on-going process of planning, development, implementation, reflection and refinement and it faces the ESP designer with a large array of complexities when it comes to developing effective materials that will meet the specific language learning needs of the ESP target group.

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