

How to Make an English for Business and Technology International Programme Accessible to Learners

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Abstract

This paper will suggest the incorporation of ongoing process-oriented practices, for example, student journals and interviews, into the design of English for Business and Technology (EBT) international programs. This will complement the product model of the EBT program which includes analysis of target situations, needs analysis, specifications of goals and objectives, sequencing learning content, syllabus checklisting, and assessment and evaluation. This approach to EBT course design will make the program more accessible to learners and enable teachers and program practitioners to enhance learner awareness of language variation and critical thinking. This paper will focus on these common features shared by EBT international programs currently conducted at Thai universities.

Introduction

In the fields of business and technology, the ability to communicate effectively in English both in writing and speaking is, of course, a key for an individual to achieve success and personal advancement. Some English for Business and Technology (EBT) curriculum planners (West, 1984) consider needs analysis following Munby's model (1978) an efficient instrument. In specifying the goals and objectives of the student, needs

identification tend to yield a profile of what he or she needs to do as well as an inventory of communicative functions and skills with their realisations or forms which the participant or prospective student has to handle. The concept of needs (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; West, 1994) covers not only necessities or demands but also '*deficiencies*' or what learners do not know, '*wants*' or what learners want or feel they need, learning strategies, constraints and a language audit or a large scale survey conducted by the company

or a country to define the long-term language training requirements. The product of needs identification, a checklist of notions/functions and skills, serves as the direction in which units of learning and content should follow, structure and decisions on assessment and evaluation should be made accordingly.

The product approach to an EBT international program has merit in placing the student and his or her communicative purposes at the centre of the curriculum. As such, however, it has some drawbacks. First, syllabus specifications which are based on small discrete units: notions, functions, or grammatical items neglect the nature of the language use as a whole. The relationship between form and function is, of course, not simply one to one but varied and complex depending on its socio-economic and cultural construct and context. Widdowson (1983) also notices this limitation, stating that dividing language into discrete units of whatever type misrepresents the nature of language as communication. More important is that the product approach to English for Specific Purposes (ESP) or EBT syllabus design tends to foster typical language-like behaviour (Brumfit, 1980), not flexible communication in which cross-cultural and intercultural factors cannot be disregarded. This is indispensable because the world is changing rapidly and becoming more transcultural (Atkinson, 1999, p. 649), and culture or cultures are not disappearing but need redefinition and reconceptualisation.

To make the syllabus sensitive and accessible to students, the process of learning, actually, a process of interaction and negotiation, is a focal point to take into account. This can be achieved by enhancing

students' involvement in and responsibility for their learning (Das, 1984). Process-oriented procedures such as interviews, questionnaires, observations, and portfolios enable students to be jointly in control of what and how to learn. In this respect, students are not only likely to develop their language experience but also to foster their critical thinking ability and to develop their cultural awareness via the use of language.

Planners of ESP (Hyland and Hyland, 1992; Lynch, Yah, Anderson and Thiyagarajah, 1999; Prince, 1984) integrated these procedures in their programmes and reported positive results in terms of students' performance as well as the effectiveness of the programmes. Similar procedures were also practised in EBT course design (Furnborough and Munns, 1984; Prince, 1984) in several countries.

The mushrooming international programmes in business and technology in Thai tertiary-level institutions are there to equip Thai students for the globalisation of organisations. In this context, international encounters, spoken and written, are unavoidable. To work effectively with an increasing number of people from outside their own cultures, Thai students need opportunities to develop not only their business and technical skills but also their English, critical-thinking and intercultural skills. These skills are indispensable in enabling the students to become successful international communicators in their prospective careers. Most Thai universities and colleges are required to design international English programmes specifically for both Thai students and their international counterparts from overseas. Thus far, little work has been

conducted to investigate the design of EBT international programmes at Thai universities and colleges. This study is a small attempt to report the steps involved in the design of such programmes.

The purpose of this study was to explore the design of EBT international programmes conducted in Thai tertiary institutions in order to find the steps involved in the course design and to describe the trends in the development of EBT international programmes for Thai and international students. The results of the study would reveal how these programmes are designed to meet the learners' specific needs and would also suggest insights into the practices which enable the programmes to be accessible to the students.

The Study

Subjects

The subjects consisted of EBT programme coordinators or managers at Thai universities. They were selected on the basis of the international nature of the programmes for which they offered services. That is, these programmes in business and technology had evidence of international student enrollment and they had English as the medium of instruction.

Method

A questionnaire adapted from Nunan's (1990) model of a learner-centred syllabus for the adult immigrant programme and semi-structured interviews (either in person or by phone) were used to collect information about the design of the EBT programmes. The questionnaire was piloted and e-mailed

or faxed to the respondents who volunteered to provide information. A copy of the questionnaire is in Appendix 1. The questions in the interviews were mostly from items in the questionnaire. Interviewees were also asked to clarify and expand any points they considered relevant and important with reference to the contexts in which the programmes were conducted. Samples of their syllabi were collected if the respondents were willing to provide them. The results reported below are based on the information from 15 programmes at 6 public and 4 private universities in Bangkok and other regions. Six programmes were at the undergraduate level. The rest targeted at post-graduate studies. Most of the undergraduate programmes varied in terms of the number of years of curriculum implementation from two to ten years whereas the number of years of post-graduate programmes operation ranged from two to seventeen years. The post graduate programmes could be classified into two categories: those operating a pre-intensive English course and those with no mandatory English course.

Results

The study, interestingly, revealed that most of the EBT international programmes were based on needs analysis (See Table 1.); needs identifications, however, were conducted in different ways depending on the nature and context of the programmes. Planners of undergraduate programmes designed their EBT course drawing on the university requirements and specifications of English for undergraduates. Their needs were defined broadly in terms of language skills. Most of the designers of post-

graduate programmes, on the other hand, conducted a survey of needs analysis. Some of them analysed the target situation in which English and linguistic behaviour would be needed and also specific tasks and activities. Pre-course placement tests in

English were also used in quite a number of the post-graduate EBT international programmes to identify students' English abilities as well as their weaknesses and deficiencies.

Table 1. Steps Involved in Programme Design

Steps Taken	Undergraduate (6)	Post-graduate(9)	
		Pre-intensive course(7)	No mandatory(3)
Needs analysis	5	7	1*
Target situation analysis	6	7	0
Specifying objectives	6	7	0
Drawing syllabus checklists	6	7	0
Designing units of work	6	7	0
Assessment and evaluation	6	6+1	0
Use of process techniques/approach	5	5	3

* Needs of an individual student who sought consultations

+ peer assessment and evaluation

Table 2. Types of Process-Oriented Techniques/Approach

Process-oriented techniques	Undergraduate (6)	Post-graduate(9)	
		Pre-study course(7)	No mandatory(3)
Questionnaires	6	5	3
Interviews	4	6	3
Portfolios	4	3	3
Students' journals	3	4	3
Observations	5	4	3
Social/cultural activities	2	3	2

As might be expected, the study showed that most of the EBT international programmes followed the typical steps in ESP course design such as specifying the goals and course objectives, preparing syllabus checklists, designing units of work or organisation, assessment and evaluation. The preparation of materials varied: most of them used in-house materials while some used commercial textbooks. Some universities offered a pre-intensive course (8-10 weeks) in EBT to equip graduate students who took an international programme in business or technology with EBT writing in particular. It is worth noticing that, at certain universities, graduate students in international business and technology were not required to take any specific course in English and were invited to participate in social and cultural activities and functions in which English was used. At others, to cater for the needs of graduate students in international business and technology, a language or a support centre was set up either to offer individual consultation or to organise specific small group sessions as requested by graduate students.

What is intriguing is that, apart from taking the product-oriented approach to EBT, most of the EBT international programmes shared some common features. They employed process-oriented approaches (See Table 2.) such as students' feedback based on questionnaires, informal and group interviews, observations, consultations, students' journals, diaries and portfolios to modify their programme to accommodate their students' needs and wants. For example, some undergraduate EBT

international programme coordinators mentioned that after they observed the class, talked with the students and went through students' journals and diaries, they set out to revise and improve the syllabus, materials and teaching strategies accordingly. Students were reported to be more satisfied with the programmes and performed better after these adjustments. Also, some coordinators of postgraduate EBT indicated that informal and group interviews encouraged their students to be expressive and critical.

Discussion and Conclusion

The practice of EBT course design normally emphasises the product-oriented approach as carried through needs identification. The specifications of needs can be converted into syllabus checklists which are useful as guidelines for programme practitioners. This sole approach, however, focuses little on the other aspect of EBT: the process. Actually, in international business and technology, as in other multicultural contexts, students need to communicate effectively, albeit in the same discipline, in different roles with others from different cultures. Therefore, similar to the pragmatics of ESP, the process which tends to foster the students' critical-thinking and adaptable behaviour is the soul of EBT international course design and it should not be separated from the heart or the product. Widdowson (1998: p. 13) has noted this important aspect of ESP as follows:

This is because we count on the sharing of common assumptions, beliefs and values: in short, on a shared culture. As this culture changes and varies, so does the language which services it alter accordingly. All of

this has led me to conclude that our primary concern is not with the English of business or whatever, but with English for business, the language that happens to be required to further the purposes of the profession. This, in turn, leads to the question of what these purposes actually are. What is business for? What kind of culture is it? What is its role and its responsibility? How does it adapt to different circumstances? ...I have suggested that this involves not simple uncritical belief in authenticity, but the special and specific contrivance of appropriate conditions in classrooms. Specificity is as much a matter of the process as the purpose of learning...

How can ESP students be equipped to such changing wind of communications in this global village in which primary and secondary cultures are prone to change? Also, native and non-native-speakers of English (NNS), and more particularly, NNS and NNS interactions are increasing. The product approach, of course, could be useful but is not sufficient.

As can be seen in this study, EBT international programmes in Thailand could be described as having three approaches. Most of the undergraduate EBT international programmes such as BBA (Bachelor of Business Administration) adopted a syllabus specified in terms of language skills such as reading, speaking, listening, writing and summarising. Some were drawn on a needs analysis of target situations which determined the kind of language, functions and notions to be learned. Such a programme was taken with credits as a foundation subject required by the university. Product-oriented as it was, the programme was rather static and tended, of

course, to make students stable and complacent instead of challenging them. Most of the undergraduate EBT international programmes also integrated process approaches such as informal interviews, questionnaires, students' journals and portfolios as means of not only summative evaluation but also on-going curriculum improvement.

Given the fact that post-graduate studies do not require credits in basic or foundation English, post-graduate international programmes in business and technology could vary in the practice of EBT. One way could be to run a pre-study non-credit course with specific skills in EBT based on either needs analysis of target situations or the analysis of students' weaknesses or both. Another way could be drawn towards the process end of the continuum by having no EBT set-up programmes but establishing a language support centre to offer services to meet arising and current needs of the students. Such services could vary from giving individual consultations, organising short EBT sessions, and social and cultural activities and functions.

The answer to what approach could be appropriate could be specific if EBT students were to function in an empty space. In evolving multicultural contexts in which the rapid development in electronic communications such as the Internet plays an integral part on our communicative affairs, integration of process-oriented techniques or the process approach could encourage EBT students to be sensitive and critical and, thus, would be a preferable choice. A similar position on the ESP

practices has been recapitulated by Johns and Swales (1998):

...we can see our longstanding engagement with ESP not so much as a series of “problem-solutions”, but rather as being a series of questions begetting yet more and more difficult questions... We see our roles as ESP instructors to

encourage our students to ask complex questions about the rich and varied tasks, texts and contexts they confront...(p.25-26)

It is, however, too early to draw conclusions. More empirical studies are needed to confirm and validate this potential of the integration of process-oriented techniques and approaches and here we do need state-of-the-art explorations.

The Author

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Appendix

Questionnaire

1. In preparing the EBT international programme, what step(s) did you take? Tick the step(s).

- 1.1 needs analysis
- 1.2 analysis of target situations
- 1.3 specifying objectives
- 1.4 drawing syllabus checklists
- 1.5 assessment and evaluation

2. How long have you been implementing the programme?

3. Have you had any problems?

4. How do you cope with such problems?

5. Have you used process-oriented techniques such as interviews, questionnaires, portfolios or observations to obtain feedback and information about the curriculum/syllabus?

6. What do you use in particular?

7. If you use such techniques, how do they help you to make the curriculum/syllabus accessible to the learner?
