

## ESP REFRESHER COURSES: REFLECTING ON OUR TEACHING PRACTICES

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Addressing wider issues related to English for specific purposes (ESP) refresher courses, the authors share insights regarding their practical involvement in course development and organisation. Since they have benefited from analysing their teaching practices, they draw on their developmental curve in teaching and syllabus design as well as on the relevant literature on syllabus design in order to offer assistance to other teachers by sparing them, to some degree, the possible stress involved in designing and delivering ESP refresher courses. In laying out the prominent factors they identified in their teaching, they include practical information on how to approach the situation: what to anticipate or avoid so as to attempt to create an engaging teaching and learning experience. In this self-reflection, they emphasise the importance of affective factors in the task of developing and implementing a process syllabus which involves the negotiation of course content and of teaching and learning strategies.

*Key words: ESP refresher course, negotiating, process syllabus, affective factors, teachers' needs, learners' needs*

### 1. INTRODUCTION: LIFELONG LEARNING AND DIVERSIFICATION OF EDUCATION

With a greater emphasis placed on lifelong learning in the context of higher education due to the Bologna process and to market requirements, there is consequently a greater demand for English for specific purposes (ESP)

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refresher courses for professionals in academic and non-academic working environments. The fact that professionals continue to pursue their education, a process which often requires bettering one's command of the English language, puts additional pressure on ESP refresher course teachers.

The diversification of education is a clear response to the fast-changing structures of societies at all levels as well as to continuous developments in the field of advanced technologies. Due to changing English language teaching (ELT) market demands, teachers often find themselves in situations which require designing a syllabus for some hypothetical future learners – occasionally making assumptions even about their age, professional needs or prior language experience. The authors of this paper have been involved in such situations. We organised and delivered courses for various specialisms within banking, engineering, medical, maritime, military, business and other domains. Since we are currently employed as language instructors in the English department of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Split, we have also spent some time team-teaching at other faculties within the University of Split. Sharing an office has further motivated us to discuss the courses we have taught.

In the spirit of lifelong learning, it can be said that this paper is an attempt to follow up on the practical teaching experience which has expanded beyond the initial theoretical framework available to the authors. The result can be viewed as a self-reflection on the continuum of our teaching realities in the field of ESP refresher courses: our hands-on as well as theoretical knowledge about English for specific purposes serves as the springboard for this teacher reflection. It consists of an account of some key issues we consider to be relevant in our teaching experience.

We provide a general description of an ESP refresher course teaching situation. Needs analysis is discussed not only as a starting point but as an ongoing process in these courses, and urgency is presented as an influential aspect. This all serves to explain the process nature of an ESP refresher course syllabus as well as the nature of the negotiating process inherent to such courses. Along the way, we also tackle affect-related factors which have been very significant throughout our ESP refresher course teaching experience.

The aim of this paper is therefore to share our reflections regarding practical involvement in ESP refresher course development and implementation in the hope that they can help reduce the stress that the process entails. We also hope that our self-reflections can serve as a source of encouragement for teachers facing such tasks.

## 2. GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF ESP REFRESHER COURSES: OUR CONCERNS

Generally, an ESP course is designed to meet the specific needs of a particular group of learners (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998: 4; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987: 19). With regard to the learners' age, ESP is "likely to be designed for adult learners, either at a tertiary level institution or in a professional work situation [...] for intermediate or advanced students. Most ESP courses assume basic knowledge of the language system, but it can be used with beginners" (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998: 5).

When it comes to ESP *refresher* courses, the pertinent features which influence the whole refresher course situation are their limited duration and the issues pertaining to course takers' previous level of English language proficiency. In our experience, such courses tend to comprise 30 to 60 contact hours. They can be intensive (e.g. three contact hours per every working day) or stretch over a period of time (e.g. two hours per week over two months or a semester). The greater the intensity, the more stress is experienced by both learners and teachers. ESP refresher courses are often envisioned and commissioned as a one-off opportunity for revision and practice. Being mostly singular occurrences within a longer stretch of time in the professionals' careers, such courses are frequently the only opportunity for them to focus on their immediate language needs.

ESP refresher course teachers have to deal with varied groups of individuals whose self-perception and perception of others (in terms of the level of language knowledge and of respective positions in the group) may be conditioned by their working context, especially with in-service courses and their particular group dynamics. Generally speaking, ESP refresher courses should be geared towards satisfying all the stakeholders: not only learners (professionals in their fields) and their employers but course teachers as well. Obviously, it is important to provide ways of enhancing the learners' level of satisfaction with the course by building trust, strengthening self-esteem and generally empowering learners as language users. It helps if teachers can recognise both negative and positive manifestations of affect in the ESP refresher course setting. However, in providing an account of positive ways of enhancing the learners' level of satisfaction with the course, we, in fact, wish to highlight the idea that the teachers' needs ought to be considered as well – in terms of reducing stress and increasing their general level of satisfaction – so that they can truly and successfully meet the needs of learners in the process. Very often teachers' needs, namely, the need to maintain self-esteem in the

changing circumstances and to handle the associated stress in order to attain a greater overall level of satisfaction with the course, are not taken into account.

ESP refresher courses are short and mostly have to be tailored around the working hours of learners; they are also frequently proposed and implemented without much preparation time factored in. As a consequence, there is an air of urgency about them which may be a significant cause of teacher stress. In order to accommodate the concerns expressed in this section, it is important that all stakeholders recognise the necessity for careful planning and the selection of appropriate content and procedures.

### **3. NEEDS ANALYSIS AND SITUATIONAL GIVENS**

In any teaching and learning situation there are always constraints and variables which have to be taken into account while designing any course (Jordan, 1997: 64-67). As to ESP refresher courses, there are frequently decisions that need to be made on the basis of practical constraints such as the working hours of all involved, availability of classrooms and equipment, etc. Additionally, there may be not just one, but two or more groups of learners in need of a refresher course in the same context (institution or company). Some important decisions which usually have to be made, such as whether to put all the more advanced learners in the same group or to opt for groups consisting of learners of mixed proficiency, are beyond the scope of this paper.

Still, needs analysis is vital for our purposes: rather than being done solely ahead of the course, needs analysis in ESP is a parallel ongoing process (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998: 121). Needs resulting from the reasons for learning of particular ESP refresher course participants will influence all decisions related to the course content and classroom procedures. As mentioned before, ESP refresher courses are mostly one-off and they are “rarely long enough to cover all that learners need. Thus, both at the needs analysis stage, and when we meet with the learners, we need information that will help us select and prioritise” (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998: 127). Therefore, our paper considers both the initial situational givens and, more importantly, needs analysis as an ongoing process.

Variables such as the budget or facilities provide less insight into the inner workings of ESP refresher courses because of their changing natures. For the purposes of this paper, rather than relying on them, we refer to two givens which can be relied upon in the Croatian context as sources of information regarding initial needs analysis: (1) high-school leaving examinations or *matura* examinations as indicators of the expected proficiency level of course takers and (2) expectations related to course content and classroom

procedures. Initial needs analysis thus often revolves around these two stated factors that can be identified as givens in the Croatian context. The role of these two sources of information in the context of needs analysis is explained in the two sections that follow.

#### **4. LEARNER PROFILE: EXPECTED LEVEL OF LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY**

As mentioned in the introduction, ESP refresher course teachers frequently have to design syllabuses for hypothetical groups of future learners, which entails making assumptions about their age, professional needs or prior language experience. We do not know which learner profile we will get when we embark on a new course. This refers not only to their respective specialist fields but also to their general knowledge and interests (educational background) as well as their expectations of the course. This, in turn, is important when identifying the common ground shared by a particular group of learners and their teacher(s). This is what initial needs analysis is about. Some of our ESP refresher courses have been designed for university graduates, and some of them have been tailored for learners of mixed educational backgrounds. Course participants graduate from secondary school or university and achieve their various professional qualifications. After that, their professional trajectories differ considerably. They may spend different periods of time pursuing their professional goals. Eventually, they get to the stage where their English skills need to be refreshed. Initial needs analyses and placement tests which we have carried out suggest that formal educational background is not, in itself, a guarantee of the English language proficiency level of learners. Additionally, our groups of participants of ESP refresher courses have also frequently been very heterogeneous not only in terms of language proficiency but of specific background professional knowledge as well.

Generally, the teachers' expectations related to adult learner language proficiency hinge on the Croatian educational system in which it is usually expected of the ESP refresher course takers to have achieved lower- to upper-intermediate level of English language proficiency. Placement tests can be geared towards proving or disproving this helpful assumption because the information provided by formal education results, for example, secondary school and *matura* results, cannot be taken as an entirely reliable benchmark. There is usually a considerable lapse of time since the learners' graduation from secondary school or university. Moreover, the uniform criteria and external evaluation of the state *matura* exams were only implemented in the academic year 2009/2010 – this may be factored in as a guarantee of school-

leaving level of proficiency in English with some future ESP refresher course takers in mind (cf.: <https://www.ncvvo.hr/brosura-drzavna-matura/>). In other words, thus far, we could rely only on the preconceived notions of high-school leaving English language proficiency as generated by the previous types of *matura* exams that our participants, coming from different generations, had taken. The state *matura* exam falls in with the previously stated notion that high-school graduates should be at a lower- to upper-intermediate level of English language proficiency.

It is important to note that the high-school leaving proficiency level is closely related to the issue of the learners' self-perception, which becomes evident from the very moment placement test results are utilised – this connection permeates the whole course. What we find again and again is that with some learners self-evaluation during the oral part of the placement test appears (later on proves to be) unreliable – for various reasons, one of them possibly being that learners may have undergone formal training which convinced them that they might be at a higher level than they actually are. On the other hand, some of them perceive their proficiency as lower than it actually is. During an ESP refresher course, such discrepancies between learners' self-perceptions and teachers' perceptions of their proficiency need to be approached through careful negotiation. The learners' self-esteem needs to be nourished while they question their perceptions of their language proficiency. For example, this can happen when the learners are, contrary to their expectations, assigned to lower level groups, when some may exhibit a range of fear-related emotions.

Thus, with regard to the English language proficiency of learners in the ESP refresher course context, placement tests can reveal major differences. They function as evidence of learner proficiency at the beginning of the course and, as such, function as a vital part of needs analysis. They provide insight into the learners' needs in terms of what kind of language they will have to use in their professional environments. They are needed because the time lapse between the ESP refresher course takers' formal English language education and a refresher course may be considerable. They are also needed because learners' perceptions of their proficiency levels depend on their previous education and their perceptions of other course participants – including teachers – as well. The possible discrepancies between teachers' expectations and reality are important because they affect the syllabus from course content to classroom procedures and group dynamics.

## 5. COURSE CONTENT AND CLASSROOM PROCEDURES

Teachers in general have tough tasks: apart from performing their traditional roles as English language instructors, they also need to take on a multitude of specific context-related roles (e.g. psychologists, managers, advisors, etc.). Furthermore, apart from the multiple roles teachers find themselves in, Hutchinson and Waters point out that unlike teachers who deliver general English courses, “the great majority of ESP teachers have not been trained as such. They need, therefore, to orientate themselves to a new environment for which they have generally been ill-prepared” (1987: 157).

In such a situation, we as teachers have frequently reached for specialist content and attempted to familiarise ourselves with the specialist domain. This approach may cause teachers to become anxious and start doubting their abilities. When considering the content of ESP refresher courses, it is important to note a common pitfall, that of attempting to give language materials the flavour of the specialism by selecting topics that would seemingly correspond to the learners’ needs – based on the group’s profile. Teachers cannot be expected to have learned enough about particular specialisms in the short preparation time that they have. Still, they need to be careful not to oversimplify the content of the materials. Learners who are experts in their respective fields might find this approach offensive or, at least, frustrating. Nunan points out that “Very often the learner has extensive knowledge in the content domain and is frustrated by what is considered a trivialization of that content” (1988: 38). Since this paper is a self-reflection on classroom realities, we have found it useful to consider possible means to handle the challenge as presented by Nunan: “The stimulus for content-based syllabuses is the notion that, unlike science, history, or mathematics, language is not a subject in its own right, but merely a vehicle for communicating about something else” (1988: 38). Even in the field of content and language integrated learning (CLIL), there may be dilemmas as to what the focus of CLIL courses is: whether it is content, language, or both content and language. According to Ball, Kelly and Clegg, such courses can be focused on the competences that underlie the subject and that are developed by means of treating both language and content as vehicles in the process of developing subject competences (2015: 25). Since, for example, a history teacher differs from an ESP refresher course teacher in that an ESP refresher course teacher is not trained as a subject specialist, the role of these vehicles is necessarily different. What also needs to be kept in mind is that, as already stated, even groups of learners that are encountered under the same specialist umbrella may be quite heterogeneous with regard to their specialist backgrounds.

It would thus be good to try to avoid yet another pitfall, namely, a very common approach to ESP course design – that of treating the linguistic content only as a vehicle or a tool. This can be done by carefully designing the syllabus so that it does not hinge on specialist content. Instead of reaching for specialist content, ESP refresher course teachers should also consider treating language as the very subject of a refresher course. For example, when practising communication with clients, rather than focusing on highly specialised operations involving complicated documents and procedures, we ask learners to focus on appropriate forms of politeness in communication with clients, so as not to come across as unintentionally rude. This is also a skill that can be transferred across specialisms.

Treating language as the content of an ESP refresher course provides justification for dwelling on the language. The process of teaching and learning the language is a balancing act, one which requires that both learners and teachers be engaged. Dudley-Evans & St John (1998) provide a compelling image of this kind of transaction.

An ESP teacher provides a bank of English for learners to use. Any judgement of appropriacy, versus accuracy, can only be made jointly. The ESP teacher is often more of a 'consultant' than a 'teller', giving advice, suggesting alternatives and allowing the learner to make informed decisions. (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998: 189)

This approach can greatly help reduce anxiety. Instead of stressing over quantities of new specialist knowledge which ESP refresher course teachers may think needs to be taught, they should focus instead on what they know best and are qualified for: teaching the language.

Summing up the theory of specific purpose language tests, among other important findings, Douglas (2000) offers evidence that can be used to corroborate these claims. Referring primarily to Caroline Clapham's 1996 study (Douglas, 2000: 30-33), he concludes that, while at lower levels of general language proficiency background knowledge cannot be used effectively, a higher level of proficiency might help a learner compensate for a lack of background knowledge when it comes to handling more specific texts.

However, there appears to be a non-linear relationship between the specificity of the input and the communicative language ability of the test takers: there seems to be a language proficiency threshold below which test takers are unable to make effective use of background knowledge, and a higher proficiency threshold above which a lack of relevant background knowledge could be compensated for by test takers making fuller use of their language resources. (Douglas, 2000: 34-36)



This finding can also apply to the ESP teacher situation. It can be assumed that (1) without appropriate language proficiency the learners cannot make effective use of their specialist knowledge and (2) it is because of their advanced language proficiency that the teachers themselves can, in fact, cope with a whole range of specialist courses, including refresher specialist ones. Their high language proficiency can compensate for a lack of specialist knowledge and training. These assumptions can greatly help in alleviating the initial stress of having to teach an ESP refresher course.

On the other hand, Hutchinson and Waters state that “the linguistic knowledge needed to comprehend the specialist text is little different from that required to comprehend the general text. The difference in comprehension lies in the subject knowledge, not the language knowledge. [...] The only real justification for having highly specialised texts is to achieve face validity” (1987: 161).

It is therefore important for teachers to establish a balance between specialist texts and the more banal examples of texts pertaining to the field just to satisfy form. As both teachers’ and learners’ needs have to be met, materials should be found which teachers can feel comfortable using for course purposes (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987: 162) and which can be useful enough to justify the choice in the mind of an ESP learner: they should be easy enough for the teacher, not offensive to the learner and interesting and useful enough for course purposes. This is a demanding task which involves a teacher-learner interactive process of negotiation (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987: 162).

## **6. NEGOTIATION: PROCESS SYLLABUS**

As has already been stated, the factors identified as givens (high-school leaving proficiency and expectations regarding course content and classroom procedures) are inbuilt in the teaching context of a refresher ESP course and, as such, can be seen as shaping the course even before the first contact with specific ESP refresher course takers. Both givens are related to the issue of learners’ self-perception, which makes an ongoing needs analysis – and therefore constant negotiating – indispensable. As stated earlier, because of the urgent nature of such courses, needs analysis is an ongoing cyclical process, starting from the teachers’ initial assumptions about the learners and the classroom situation. Because of the need for an ongoing needs analysis, the syllabus cannot be fixed in advance, but becomes a process and is modelled and remodelled throughout the course. Like needs analysis itself, the syllabus suited for this context is a process rather than a ready-made product.

With a process syllabus, content and classroom procedures are inbuilt in the teaching context as, according to Nunan, “once consideration of learning processes is built into the syllabus, the traditional distinction between syllabus design and methodology becomes difficult to sustain” (1988: 39). The process-oriented syllabus is, in our opinion, an appropriate vehicle for an ESP refresher course: it best fits the needs of all the participants. In such courses, the learners’ language needs are (re)identified from task to task, they are not pre-set. This is reflected in the selection of both content and classroom procedures.

The following example may illustrate the nature of this approach. During an ESP refresher course which we team taught, what we found effective and time-saving was the continuous negotiation of specialist content and communicative situations, e.g. identifying topics for group discussions. This spared us having to wade through specialist literature to identify important topics as the course participants themselves proposed the most relevant topics for them personally for each of their specialisms.

Teachers should thus not be overly concerned about their initial unfamiliarity with the specialist content. By implementing a process-oriented syllabus they can negotiate a course (1) by relying on their advanced language proficiency and drawing on their teaching expertise as well as (2) by drawing on learners’ specialist knowledge and previous learning experiences. In this way, both the teacher and the learners become active agents in the process, using their respective experiences, specialist knowledge and skills to contribute to the collective decision-making aimed at using the short course time in the most efficient way possible.

Breen and Littlejohn write about negotiating in the context of classroom decision-making. In the introduction to the collection of papers on decision-making in the classroom environment, they provide a generalisable rationale for negotiating which activates and enhances collaboration among all classroom participants. They see such negotiation as “*classroom-group* centred, serving a collective teaching-learning process and, thereby, individuals located as members of a group” (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000a: 24). Still, on the other hand, relying on the process syllabus which calls for negotiation might lead to some methodological discrepancies. The communicative approach (the focus being on interaction and skills building tasks) is generally present in English language teaching and learning. Syllabuses are commonly designed with this in mind. Despite that, both learners and teachers can go through the whole course scenario not fully aware of one of the mechanisms underlying the communicative process: that of negotiation. Despite having been exposed to

the communicative approach through their previous education, both learners and teachers might have difficulties with the open-ended nature of a process syllabus and the inherent negotiation processes. For the most part, learners, including teachers as learners, may not be used to what the process syllabus entails (e.g. the focus being on interaction and skills building tasks). As Breen and Littlejohn (2000b) point out in the concluding chapter of their collection, learner responsibility is an important element in the teaching and learning process.

Learners may have experienced years of classroom work in which they have learned that their role is to behave as if following the path laid down by a teacher rather than sharing in negotiating the route. Such learners may have abdicated their own responsibility for learning and may not be ready to believe the teacher who calls upon it through negotiative work. (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000b: 278)

Indeed, as confirmed by Mihaljević Djigunović in the analysis of her research into affective factors in the context of teaching and learning foreign languages in Croatia, one of the teachers' roles should be to assist learners in reclaiming responsibility for their own learning (1998: 152). The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* offers a list of ways in which teachers can encourage learners to accept responsibility by reflecting on how they learn (Council of Europe, 2001: 149). Together, teachers and ESP refresher course participants can negotiate the interconnected issues related to their specific ESP classroom situation and approaches to learning. Breen and Littlejohn (2000a) suggest one such list of very broad questions which can be negotiated depending on the requirements of a particular course and of the learners' needs.

- the purposes of their work together;
- the content or subject matter of their work;
- their various ways of working together;
- their preferred means of evaluation of the efficiency and quality of the work and its outcomes so that new directions in the work can be identified. (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000a: 30)

Negotiating one category leads to having to renegotiate another one and maybe coming back again to the first one – it is a process.

Apart from the categories which involve the obvious practicalities, that is, the situational givens such as the timetable and the equipment needed, along with course content and classroom procedures there appears, in our experience, another prominent issue which has to be negotiated again and

again, from one ESP refresher course to another: learners' perceptions of their own language proficiency. Learners' needs related to their language proficiency very often revolve around working on accuracy: that is what they need, and they very often think they do not. Handling this sensitive issue is complex as it may affect the self-esteem of learners who are highly respected professionals. Furthermore, they may be proficient in some language areas (e.g. specialist vocabulary, being able to read and understand highly specialised content) but unable to actively employ some basic language structures. Moreover, learners sometimes may perceive the strengths of a process syllabus as a sign of weakness on the part of the teacher – because it relies heavily on negotiation, it opens issues which may affect learners' self-perceptions in the context of classroom power dynamics. As stated in the introduction, negotiation is always a sensitive endeavour as affect plays an important role in implementing any process syllabus. This added pressure is there from the start due to the nature of the process syllabus and the shortness of preparation and course time.

Generally, there is little time to negotiate the learners' perceptions of the teaching situation. It needs to be emphasised that ESP refresher courses we have designed and taught have been, by force, rather teacher-oriented, particularly as far as the scope of negotiation is concerned: we have mainly focused on negotiating what we ourselves have detected as the learners' needs in the process and we did not have sufficient time to get feedback from the learners on the effects of the negotiating process itself – according to Breen and Littlejohn, shifts in attitude of both teachers and learners do take time (2000b: 278). Our refresher courses were mainly about teacher-oriented negotiation because they were short and it was more difficult to bring about a shift in perception on the part of the learners within such a short period. This is also why our approach to negotiation was, by necessity, more selective than gradual – to refer to terms used by Breen and Littlejohn (2000b: 282).

The selective nature of this approach was illustrated earlier in this section when negotiating a process syllabus was sketched. When identifying topics for discussion, we continually asked course participants to discuss which of the offered topics they would choose and why. We did not apply the selective approach when it came to communicative efficiency and language accuracy: rather than negotiated with the learners, the tasks focusing on these areas were designed by the teachers themselves. The process of negotiating the topics which hinged on teachers and learners discussing their choices provided us with the language that was afterwards, in itself, treated as course content. For example, when arguing their point, Croatian learners would

frequently make mistakes that stemmed from the interference of Croatian grammar on their sentence structures in English.

## 7. AFFECT AND GOOD ATMOSPHERE

As stated earlier, we subscribe to the view that a process syllabus seems to be the best platform for ESP refresher courses, implying that the concept of negotiating is central therein. Negotiating is a complex activity because it draws on both rational and emotional human potential. As such, it is a skill which teachers need to cultivate by intensifying efforts aimed at gaining psychological insight into the affective side – both positive and negative – of the learning and teaching process. Affect needs to be considered when negotiating teaching and learning methods, as teachers need to be prepared for the stress caused by urgency which is part and parcel of ESP refresher course-teaching situations so that they can turn a difficult situation in their favour.

For want of a fixed definition of the complexities that the word “affect” entails when it comes to language learning, Arnold and Brown, addressing this issue in *Affect in Language Learning*, provide the following definition of affect: “In the present context, affect will be considered broadly as aspects of emotion, feeling, mood or attitude which condition behaviour” (1999: 1). This definition is broad enough to allow for the consideration of the range of emotions arising from the previously stated necessities imposed by a process syllabus. Familiarity with affect-related issues would greatly help teachers in making the most of the range of situations stemming from the givens which have been presented as existing in the Croatian context, since in order to serve the needs of learners as members of human societies “we need to be concerned with both their cognitive and affective natures and needs” (Arnold & Brown, 1999: 3).

The two givens we have presented are: (1) the expected learners’ level of proficiency before the beginning of the course – combined with the teacher’s insights into the learners’ self-perceptions, and (2) course content and classroom procedures as influenced by both teacher and learner expectations originating from their respective educational backgrounds. Our teaching practice has shown that what needs to be negotiated, in fact, stems from these two givens which are closely related to affective factors in different classroom situations. This awareness can help teachers to embark on any new course with more confidence.

A good atmosphere plays a vital role in any course. With ESP refresher courses, it is even more important to achieve this goal right from the start

because such courses are short and hardly is there ever enough preparation time (a description of a sample initial activity is provided in the section entitled Power Dynamics). For a useful working definition of a good classroom atmosphere, we refer to the following one: “Emotionally, a suitable environment for language learning should be one that enhances the trust needed to communicate and which enhances confidence and self-esteem” (Williams & Burden, 1997: 202). These crucial aspects related to creating a suitable learning – and teaching – environment permeate our examples.

### **8. LEARNER SELF-PERCEPTION: PROFICIENCY AND EVALUATION**

Learner proficiency is verified through evaluation. As stated earlier, it is a good idea to start an ESP refresher course with a placement test. This enables us to deal with both learners’ perceptions of their level of proficiency and with our initial assessment of it. Placement tests have two functions which are useful in the context of ESP refresher courses: they can be used for the practical purposes of assigning learners to classes according to their language proficiency and for diagnostic purposes which facilitate the initial stage of a process syllabus.

They can serve as a good opportunity for teachers to find out the answers to some important affect-related questions even before the course starts. The type of placement test which we find most useful and applicable to various ESP refresher course situations consists of two parts: (1) not only a grammar and vocabulary check but a writing task as well, and (2) an interview. The learners’ self-perception in terms of their language proficiency can be determined by asking them fairly simple questions during the interview part of the placement test (e.g. *Why do you need English? What tasks can you perform in English?*). The questions should be open-ended and simple enough to provide an opportunity for the course takers of different language proficiencies to answer according to their abilities. Their answers to such questions can provide two pieces of information: their subjective self-evaluation and a more objective insight into their language proficiency from the teachers’ point of view.

Since ESP refresher courses are short, the learners cannot be expected to expand their language knowledge significantly (e.g. to move from the intermediate to advanced level). This needs to be taken into account when the final evaluation is designed: for this reason, we propose to opt for a final presentation. We have used this task in such a way as to give the learners freedom to choose content they feel safe with in displaying their language skills and competences. With that in mind, for face validity, it is a good idea to

narrow down the task to their specialist fields. Presentation as a type of final evaluation gives learners the opportunity to be seen at their best. What is more, learners frequently need presentation skills for professional purposes (participation in conferences and seminars for professional development) – this information can be gathered from the initial needs analysis. When teachers help learners see that the task is relevant to them, it can then be appreciated by learners as useful and enjoyable. Writing about the psychological considerations in teaching, Williams and Burden state that “An important aspect of an educative experience is that the learners perceive the value of the task for themselves and their own development” (1997: 204). The presentation task offers a degree of comfort as learners stay in their familiar specialist domains. All this allows teachers to preserve an atmosphere of trust and to build up learners’ self-esteem.

### **9. COURSE CONTENT AND CLASSROOM PROCEDURES: STRATEGIES**

As previously stated, in their efforts to achieve face validity, ESP teachers should try to avoid trivialisation when selecting topics and materials related to the learners’ areas of expertise. In a process syllabus, where content can be negotiated, the teachers should also make sure that the learners take responsibility in the process of selecting content which will be relevant to their needs.

Affect-related issues may arise when negotiating the ratio of general and specialist content. Our final evaluation in the form of final presentations can serve as an example of the learners actively choosing content from their specialist field and a way in which to present it. Another way of achieving balance is relying on expertise from the group. The learners feel empowered when their teachers make use of their individual and group expertise. They can then demonstrate both their professional and language competences. Promoting active learner participation, encouraging the learners to create content, compose sets of classroom rules, give feedback, and making sure there is a balance between teacher-talk and learner-talk – all through negotiating – the lot is a guarantee of creating an environment in which the learners can acquire both language and social skills needed for successful interaction.

When the learners' needs, whatever they may be, become apparent during the course at any point, the teachers manage these needs as they see fit. Exercises done the following day(s) can be targeted specifically at meeting the identified needs. Since it was our aim to improve our teaching by venturing into this paper as an exercise in self-reflection, which can also hopefully be

helpful to other teachers in terms of reducing stress, we match our classroom experiences with readings on the subject. Thus, for example, in a situation where we notice that the learners lack the language to compare and contrast, one of the possible courses of action is to devise this simple task for the following day: the learners are asked to compare their old and new offices or teaching buildings in order to practise comparison. Dudley-Evans and St John provide a description of such a task: “relocation of head office to a new site” (1998: 181). They refer to such simple task structures (two columns for comparison in this case) as framework materials or frameworks (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998: 180). Such framework materials are very practical as they allow learners to produce both their own specialist and language content: this can help reduce stress as it is the learners who provide specialist content as they see fit, giving the teacher enough input and time to evaluate and help improve their language competences after having pinpointed the specific need. These classroom management strategies rely on negotiating. By negotiating content and procedures with the learners, we – as teachers – exemplify ways of using language flexibly to enable the learners to participate “in *other* discourse contexts beyond the classroom” (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000a: 23). Practising language functions such as comparison can also serve as an example of treating language as the content of an ESP refresher course: the learners can use comparison to talk about beakers or screws – anything that constitutes their particular specialism.

Content and strategies for managing classroom procedures are important when it comes to streamlining learners’ questions and digressions (e.g. anecdotes). They need to be handled in such a way as to ensure the learners are provided with equal opportunities in terms of talking time as well as to make sure the teacher does not end up overly dominated by the learners. The teacher can choose to answer questions right away or when it is deemed appropriate. It is important to be able to bracket or postpone certain topics and questions without affecting the learners negatively. Generally speaking, the process of negotiating any course content or classroom procedure may appear noisy and chaotic to some adult learners. As previously stated, learners may be accustomed to teacher-centred classroom organisation. Apparent chaos which may result from classroom-centred rather than individual learner-centred activities can sometimes be one of the side-effects of such an approach – some learners may not respond favourably to more chaotic circumstances that may accompany some communicative tasks. Noise is sometimes a side-effect of negotiation-based classroom communication as well: some adult learners may not – or they think they may not – thrive in such circumstances.



They may be unaccustomed to noise (background noises, noisy learners) that is both an authentic undertone and a by-product of communication. Chaos and noise as aspects of communication can also have a bearing on power dynamics in the classroom.

### **10. POWER DYNAMICS**

Power dynamics among learners themselves is also important in terms of affect since our process-oriented syllabuses have been classroom-group centred (they have not revolved around individual learners but a collective). As with the learners' perceptions of their proficiency, issues may arise with discrepancies related to how they see themselves within a particular classroom group: some may be overly dominant while some tend to be more passive due to their self-perceived fluency and/or work-related power status. Our experience teaches us that taking the learners' self-esteem into account should be one of the teacher's concerns throughout a course, along with reflections on their position of power in the world outside the classroom. People who know each other professionally and who are highly respected in their working environments are placed in a new, unnatural context in which they have to cooperate in a different setting (sometimes noisy and chaotic) using a different language – for different purposes.

In order to draw attention to teacher stress, we would like to point out that ESP refresher course teachers may be affected by power issues as well as by other affect-related concerns stated above. For, to reiterate: ESP refresher courses, being process-oriented, require negotiation which may give rise to various power plays in which teachers are also involved. Given the diversification of the need for ESP refresher courses, teachers frequently find themselves teaching in host institutions rather than in their own classrooms. This means that, technically speaking, they are guests rather than hosts when it comes to in-service ESP refresher courses. Teachers can use this to their advantage by exploiting these circumstances at the very beginning in order to create a good atmosphere and to ease the learners into the negotiating process. The following is an example of an initial activity which we like to do and which teachers can use to promote a good atmosphere right from the start, as it can also help reduce both learner and teacher stress. It is devised as a presentation based on a framework which can generate a type of output that is relevant to the course (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998: 183).

The learners can be divided into groups according to their professional compatibility (e.g. learners who share the same office or profession). In order for the teacher to be able to visualise the whole working environment of the

learners, they are given the task of presenting their offices or labs and explaining to other learners and the teacher what they do. A guided tour of the building can end in a less formal environment such as the company canteen. This activity can be done by walking around the actual premises (a real walking tour) or, where this is not possible, it can be simulated in the classroom where desks and aisles can represent parts of the building (a simulated walking tour done in the classroom – from desk to desk). Groups of learners negotiate who the spokesperson(s) for their group will be, which specialist information to include and how to combine segments of the visit into a coherent tour of the whole company or institution.

Issues which were presented above become apparent in the process of carrying out this task. To name but a few: this task can provide good grounds for the ongoing needs analysis by providing insight into the learners' self-perceptions, negotiating is presented as a real-life necessity which the learners manage spontaneously, they feel empowered because they make use of their professional expertise in the process, they join forces with the teacher in assuming responsibility for the direction in which the course will head. The task is collaborative and thus encourages the learners to use their communication skills. The task is also stress-reducing for the teacher because it requires minimum preparation: by providing the learners with a framework for the task, the teacher can safely rely on the learner-generated content. The learners are placed in a safe situation: they are "at home" in their familiar professional environment, and the content they select for the task is familiar to them as well.

This is the very first task and the initial feedback on how the learners presented their familiar environment is given to groups rather than individual learners. The teacher thus works from the start on building trust and establishing good relations within groups, because when feedback is given to a collective, chances are the learners can feel less threatened. In this way, the teacher provides the groundwork for practicing receiving and giving feedback throughout the course. This strategy sets an emotionally positive foundation for feedback without provoking anxiety in the learners. Eventually, in the final individual presentation task, the learners make use of the feedback received from the initial task onwards. They are emotionally prepared to receive feedback not only from the teacher but from the whole group which acts as the classroom audience.

## 11. TEACHER STATUS

The teachers' self-perceptions and their perceptions of others also need to be considered in the light of negotiating, for, according to Breen and Littlejohn (2000b), negotiation places certain requirements upon both teachers and learners. As examples, they list risk-taking, flexibility and tolerance (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000b: 278). What being a guest when there are in-service ESP refresher courses to be taught means for teachers is that they too might feel they are stepping outside their comfort zones. External and internal processes that shape approaches to content and classroom procedures affect not only learners but all the stakeholders, particularly the teachers. Hutchinson and Waters note that "One of the most important features of ESP in relation to General English is that the status of English changes from being a subject in its own right to a service industry for other specialisms" (1987: 164), and they list ways in which this affects the status of ESP teachers. Even though they see some positive examples as well, this leads them to conclude that "whatever the effect on the teachers' status, the result of a move to ESP is always to make the ESP teacher more accountable to others" (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987: 164).

We have felt the effects of the diversification of teaching and learning in our practice. ESP teachers are accountable to all stakeholders in the process, which can induce more stress than they can sometimes manage. The list of stakeholders may include: superiors, other teachers, learners and society as a whole. Superiors can come from their own teaching institutions and from the client's side. If teaching is to take place at a venue that belongs to the client, then the teacher has the status of a guest. This may affect the power dynamics of the teaching process. However, as illustrated with the previously described example, teachers can use this to their advantage by making the learners aware of their role as hosts in performing social rituals and negotiating teaching conditions.

Even so, regardless of where ESP refresher courses take place, the three of us find that we, as teachers, face common fears. In the hope of helping teachers who, like us, may harbour such apprehensions, we list some of them along with possible remedies. Teachers may worry about not being able to satisfy all the learners all the time, as if with a magic wand... They might fear being offensive or coming across as offensive in communication with highly educated professionals they mostly deal with in ESP refresher courses, namely, in cases when the language knowledge of such learners is below what is expected, when dealing with having to return to language basics or when assigning learners to groups. Generally, teachers may have concerns about disappointing learners by not meeting their expectations. They may feel

insecure about being well-enough prepared in terms of specialist knowledge. Teachers might also be concerned about situations where they risk letting power learners be in charge or dominate the class due to their high position in the workplace or their advanced specialist subject knowledge.

In terms of possible remedies, there are certain ways of alleviating the pressures these fears may impose. Relying on the learner-generated course content is one of them. Comfort can also be found in the fact that the teachers' linguistic competences can compensate for their unfamiliarity with the subject. Team-building tasks can be employed to ensure a good atmosphere as well as to make sure that power students do not dominate the classroom group. What is more, because a teaching process founded on constant renegotiation can easily cause fatigue, we suggest that teachers find some comfort also in the fact that they can learn a lot from the adult professionals they interact with. Hutchinson and Waters point out that, along with other multiple roles an ESP teacher or practitioner has to perform, there is also the role of being "an interested student of the subject matter" (1987: 163). Assuming the role of an interested student can help reduce the stress imposed by the requirements placed on the teachers of ESP refresher courses.

Our self-reflection aimed at helping ESP refresher course teachers deliver their courses with greater ease has, among other components, focused on affect. Arnold and Brown refer to the concept of emotion as "the Cinderella of mental functions" for its traditional treatment in the study of psychology (1999: 1). They, however, also mark the evidence of a reversal of this trend due to the more recently established belief that awareness of both negative and positive emotional factors can help in the processes of teaching and learning (Arnold and Brown, 1999: 1-2). In this we find justification for dwelling on *both* the learners' and the teachers' perceptions and their expectations regarding ESP refresher courses.

## **12. CONCLUSION**

What with the urgency element in course planning and implementation and the diverse nature of groups, it is clear that when negotiating course content and procedures, awareness of the affective component has to rank highly in the teachers' efforts to satisfy the needs of the learners and their employers as well as their own. In order to make sure that the learning and teaching environment is pleasant and unhindered by negative affective factors, content and classroom procedures need to be negotiated from the beginning throughout the course. A good atmosphere is conducive to the successful

handling of possible affect-related issues that underlie both learning and teaching.

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## TEČAJEVI OBNOVE ZNANJA ENGLESKOG JEZIKA STRUKE: RAZMATRAMO SVOJU NASTAVNIČKU PRAKSU

Baveći se širim okvirom provedbe tečajeva obnove znanja engleskog jezika kao jezika struke, autorice prikazuju svoja zapažanja utemeljena na iskustvu osmišljavanja i izvođenja takve vrste tečajeva. Budući da im je analiza vlastite nastavničke prakse bila od koristi, osvrću se na svoje dosadašnje iskustvo u sastavljanju nastavnih planova i na značajnu literaturu iz tog područja kako bi pomogle drugim nastavnicima te im tako donekle umanjile mogući stres koji proizlazi iz planiranja i izvođenja ovih tečajeva. Iznoseći važne elemente koje su uočile u svojoj nastavničkoj praksi, upućuju na praktične načine pristupanja ovakvim tečajevima: što očekivati ili izbjegavati kako bi i nastavnicima i polaznicima iskustvo podučavanja i učenja bilo poticajno. U radu naglašavaju važnost afektivnih faktora u osmišljavanju nastavnog plana kao procesa koji uključuje pregovaranje o sadržaju, ali i o strategijama podučavanja i učenja.

*Ključne riječi: tečaj obnove znanja engleskog jezika struke, pregovaranje, nastavni plan kao proces, afektivni faktori, potrebe nastavnika, potrebe polaznika*