

## ESP Course Design in East Asia

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### Introduction

As a larger number of business sectors become globalized, ESP, or English for Specific/Specific Purposes programs have been becoming more commonplace in East Asia. The majority of East Asian employees working in the middle and higher ranks of international companies require some English language skills including answering specific phone inquiries, writing emails to overseas clients, and interpreting technical manuals. As the necessary skills for these tasks are not usually taught in a general daily-conversation EFL classroom, these international companies in East Asia are looking for programs that focus on specific needs.

The increasing demand of ESP programs has sprouted a multitude of language training organizations that offer courses focusing on a particular or specific need. Unfortunately, many of these programs are plagued with problems resulting in programs that are both expensive, unhelpful, and possibly hurtful to a students' job prospects.

By comparing and contrasting a few ESP programs in East Asia, this paper aims to satisfy two goals. The first is to identify several guidelines needed to establish successful ESP course design and the second is to explore the key differences between ESP and general English. To help meet these goals, particular focus will be given toward a failed flight attendant ESP program in South Korea and a successful ESP program in China geared toward technical employees of an industrial institution.

### Flight Attendant Training in Korea: A Failed ESP Program

In a male-dominated society such as South Korea, it is no wonder that the international tourism industry is a very popular sector of employment for Korean women. Korean females aggressively seek international tourism jobs, particularly flight attendant jobs, as it gives them a perception of escape from reality. For example, when a German airline advertised in Korea for three positions, there were over 27,000 applicants (Robertson, 2005). That equates to a success rate of just over .01%.

International flight attendants are required to have strong capabilities in English, potentially opening the doors for beneficial ESP programs in this field. Unfortunately, many unqualified businesses are being established to prey on the dreams of naïve young women. In his study *How to Become a Flight Attendant in Korea: English Skills*, Paul Robertson glances at the industry and identifies the shortcomings of several of the ESP programs intended for prospective flight attendants.

Robertson suggests that a large number of ESP course in Korea neglect to mention the small chances of succeeding in the competitive environment of flight attendant training. Unrealistic goals are presented as reachable resulting in the weaning of young women who will pay thousands of dollars for a course that will 'qualify' them and give them an edge against the stiff competition.

Most of the 100s of flight attendant courses offered in Korea involve courses on make-up application, manner and etiquette, English interview skills and TOEIC preparation. Based on this curriculum, successful completion of a flight attendant course relies heavily on English abilities; however, the instructors are rarely qualified to teach English and in many cases the instructors themselves do not have the English ability to become a flight attendant. Serious inadequacies also exist with the material used. One error-plagued excerpt from a custom-made textbook focusing on interviews taught the following dialogue:

Q: Would you please tell me about yourself?

A: Thank you for give me a chance to introduce myself. My name is Eun Kyong Park. I was borned in a little country town named Changwon in 1982, and grow up in Changwon. I graduate from ABC University in February this year. I major in Korean history. I like musics and also likes to playing tennis. (Robertson, 2005)

In addition to teaching material that hinders instead of helping the chances of securing a flight attendant job, many ESP programs in Korea set up fraudulent interviews that are completely fake and only practiced to give the impression of hope. After the prospective flight attendants have paid their fees and taken the fake interview, they are told that they have failed the interview process. In one deceiving interview, the heavily accented instructor asked the student "There are many applicants (intended to say applicants), why should I choose you?" (Robertson, 2005). Due to problems differentiating between 'l' and 'r' sounds, this question elicited many answers involving the applicant's knowledge of Africa and Africans. If non-native level instructors are teaching these ESP courses, even if a student can progress through this course, there is a lack of reality since the students will theoretically be communicating with large numbers of native English speakers in the industry. If the students are being instructed exclusively by Koreans, then nothing will be learned of the culture or customs of those who may be their main client.

Another major issue involving this flight attendant ESP program, and other programs lacking integrity, is the lack of scrutiny in the application process. If the prospective student is a virtual beginner as is the case in many situations, their thousands of dollars will be indiscriminately accepted by the school. This is not only fraudulent, but it negatively affects the learning progress of those students who have decent English capabilities but who are slowed down to accommodate the unqualified speakers.

In East Asia, ESP is in its infancy though it is growing at a rapid pace. Despite the existence of many inadequate programs created solely for profit by unqualified parties, there do exist a large number of programs taught by education professionals that carefully plan curriculum based on the feedback and needs of the students.

## English Training for a Chinese Metallurgy Company: A Successful ESP Program

The Chongqing Iron and Steel Designing Institute (CISDI) in Chongqing China identified the need to train technical staff in English as their company was becoming increasingly involved with foreign suppliers and clients. This resulted in the establishment of a training program for their employees with help from the Sino-British English Training Center in Chongqing, China. The Training Center was responsible for all stages of the learning process including needs analysis, curriculum, course design, material production, instruction, testing, and evaluation. Based on a prior knowledge of the English language and continuous feedback and evaluation, the Sino-British Training Center established a program found to be very beneficial to all participants. Yong Chen provides detailed descriptions of this program in his 2006 paper: *From Core to Specific*.

The program was 16 weeks full-time and it involved three different classes with 20 to 28 students in each class. The students were aged between 25 and 38 and they all completed at least 10 years of formal education (Chen, 2006). The course was voluntary to all employees of CISDI though a pre-test needed to be written to ensure a minimum level of competence in English. Also, as a means to encourage motivation, class participants indirectly paid for the course by receiving a lower end-of-year bonus.

The instructors of the program all came from the same Sino-British Training Centre where they all had a minimum level of education and experience. Some of the instructors possessed master's degrees and most had experience teaching at the university level at Chongqing University. There was very low turnover amongst instructors and regular meetings were held to swap ideas and experiences and to ensure quality education in all classes.

During the course, the instructors and students of this ESP program benefited greatly from the multi-media options that were available during the course. In addition to approved texts and books; tapes, videos, TVs, and computers were used to help simulate a real corporate environment (Chen, 2006).

Three stages of student needs analysis were employed during the program. The first stage was the pre-course stage and it included a combination of questionnaires, interviews, and tests that would help set the initial outlook of the course. In this initial stage, language needs were discussed with both the students and the chief engineer of CISDI. Interestingly, the needs communicated by the students and the chief engineer were quite different. After a thorough interview with the chief engineer, several needs and objectives were identified. Some of these included reading specialist literature, writing instructions and technical manuals, technical negotiation, and receiving foreign visitors. Contrarily, the pre-course interviews with the students revealed their desires to learn skills that would allow them to perform more general functions such as living abroad, Chinese-English translating, as well as enjoying films, shows, and music in English. This discrepancy in focus posed a challenge to the curriculum developers, as they needed to satisfy both the demands of the chief engineer and the students (Chen, 2006).

The second and third stages of the needs analysis were conducted after the start of the program. The second stage involved identifying needs while the class was ongoing. This included weekly student feedback via questionnaires as well as quizzes and tests to help identify student strengths and weaknesses. The final stage was the post-course stage and this involved final tests and a comprehensive course evaluation form to be completed by the students (Chen, 2006).

The CISDI project received high praise from participants and contracts were renewed. Components of the framework described by Chen have been emulated to benefit similar programs in China and the rest of East Asia.

## Discussion and Considerations

Based on the shortcomings of the Korean flight attendant programs and the strengths of the Chinese technical ESP course, many approaches and techniques can be inferred that will contribute to a successful ESP course where students are motivated and ultimately equipped with the skills needed to effectively operate in a particular field.

In contrasting these two programs, the most notable difference stems from the qualifications of the instructors. The flight attendant program instructors did not have the language abilities to become flight attendants themselves while teaching incorrect structures and skills. On the other hand, experienced native speakers drawn from a higher learning institution taught the program at CISDI. All the instructors had similar qualifications and experience resulting in a standard delivery of quality education.

When Chen describes the ESP program at CISDI, a lot of importance is placed on needs analysis. One major challenge was identified when the students and the chief engineer had contrasting opinions related to needs. Especially with a large class such as at CISDI, people will have different needs and a balance needs to be reached that will satisfy all participants most of the time. It is extremely important to recognize the common needs of a class and teach a curriculum that will benefit the most number of students. Keeping student satisfaction at the forefront will ensure a motivated student body.

When developing an ESP course, Chen left no doubt that a needs analysis is necessary though he fails to mention its relationship with attainable goals. To maintain a high level of motivation, students need constant reminders of why they are studying a task and how it will help them. Goals should be mentioned both at the beginning and end of every class. In the case of Korean flight attendant programs, promises were made that graduates will have a good chance to realize their goal as a commercial flight attendant when the reality was that only .01% of applicants will be accepted for a given job (Robertson, 2005). Another challenge exists when trying to establish attainable goals with large classes of students with varying linguistic abilities. Even with entrance minimums and standards, students will have varying levels and individual goals. Moreover, students will have different interpretations of attainable goals and effective teaching methods, and even considering a large number of students working in a common field, ESP students within a class will have to perform different tasks in English. To balance varying student levels, the instructor needs to demand more from the higher level students while using group work activities where the dynamics of each smaller group will maximize the abilities of all participants.

It can not be ignored that there are a large number of unqualified instructors in East Asia simply looking for an international experience for one or two years before heading back home to their native

countries. In some cases, the students in East Asia know more specific English skills related to their field than an instructor who has just finished a liberal arts degree. ESP teachers need to be equipped with teaching skills acquired through years of experience and/or education. The Korean ESP schools failed in this area by hiring unqualified, non-native speakers who were unable to effectively prepare students for the situations they would face as a flight attendant. Contrarily, experienced university teachers, some with a master's degree in education, taught the ESP program at CISDA. Teaching experience and the ability to teach a language effectively is so crucial as any professional in a particular trade can have great difficulties instructing others about the nuances and language items involved in that mutual area of work.

An important issue that was not raised in either study involves the necessity of creating a simulated environment that will help the students succeed in real life. Ironically, the fake interview set up by the corrupt Korean schools would actually act as an effective warm-up to a real interview. In his overview of the CISDA program, Chen stressed the importance of testing and evaluation; however, there was very little mention of exercises and projects that would simulate the environment the students would be immersed in after completing the course. Some effective projects could include a mock-conference or company tours for visiting clients.

In a critique of existing ESP programs in China, Gao Jiajing identifies the problems of these programs while proposing a framework for ESP geared toward graduating university students. In her 2007 article titled *Designing an ESP course for Chinese University Students of Business*, Gao applies many of the successful components of Chen's CISDI model including needs analysis at three different stages, minimum English capability requirements, and relevance. However, Gao's suggested contemporary model is based on a curriculum focusing on general skills needed for succeeding in a wide range of entry-level positions. While a few curriculum components involve specific activities such as resume writing and the interview process, the majority of curriculum units involve general practice in the four major areas of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. This would be consistent with Chen's observations of students wanting to learn more general English skills, but is this course really more 'special' or 'specific' than a group of students learning to effectively order steak and eggs in an American greasy spoon restaurant?

Many academics have argued about the definition of ESP and how ESP programs can differentiate themselves from general English programs. According to Chen and Gao, the answer to this question seems to revolve around the pre-requisite of knowing intermediate English skills. If ESP courses can establish effective criteria to determine appropriate level of competence (TOEIC scores, custom-made tests, etc.), then it can be assumed that daily conversation and linguistic survival skills are well established. As each ESP course is considered 'special' or 'specific', it becomes very difficult to set an accepted standard of ability.

The effective definition and promotion of ESP programs will play a large role in determining the scale of success of these programs in the future. Establishing a clear definition of ESP and identifying how these programs differ from general English continues to be a challenge for many education academics.

## Concluding Thoughts and ESP in the Future

In order to determine the future course of ESP, one must develop a firm definition of ESP and how it differs from general English. There are many contrasting theories and opinions relating to what exactly constitutes an ESP program, though several general characteristics can be identified through Chen's study and by the contributions of others in ESP.

Strevens (1988) defines ESP as a program that meets specific needs and related in content to a particular discipline, activity, or occupation. Strevens says that class content should focus on activities appropriate to these activities in terms of syntax, lexis, discourse, and semantics. Dudley-Evans (1998) offers a similar definition although he stresses a different methodology from general English focusing on intermediate or advanced students. Dudley-Evans (1998) identified both absolute and variable characteristics of an ESP course. These characteristics are as follows:

### *Absolute Characteristics*

1. ESP is defined to meet specific needs of the learners



2. ESP makes use of underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves
3. ESP is centered on the language appropriate to these activities in terms of grammar, lexis, register, study skills, discourse and genre. (Dudley-Evans, 1998)

#### *Variable Characteristics*

1. ESP may be related to or designed for specific disciplines
2. ESP may use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of General English
3. ESP is likely to be designed for adult learners, either at a tertiary level institution or in a professional work situation. It could, however, be for learners at secondary school level
4. ESP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students.
5. Most ESP courses assume some basic knowledge of the language systems (Dudley-Evans, 1998)

These definitions continue to leave a lot of room for interpretation and flexibility. It seems necessary that there will always be components of general English involved in ESP in order to bridge the gap between areas of specific study. As mentioned in the CISDI case, students enjoy learning general English skills in addition to specific English skills. If proper needs analysis is done, instructors will continue to teach general English skills in the ESP classroom.

With increasing dependence on foreign trade with East Asian countries, steady tourism, and global marquee events such as the Korea-Japan World Cup and the Beijing Olympics, increasing pressure will be placed on East Asian countries to develop specific English skills in a variety of fields and specialties. As scripts can rarely be written for spontaneous communication, it is of utmost important that prospective students of an ESP program have the capabilities to improvise in unexpected situations. For this reason, ESP should be taught only to students with at least intermediate skills.

Once a successful ESP program has been established, continual feedback from the students and research by the instructor is needed to address the many inevitable changes in an industry or trade. With economies growing and shrinking and transportation and communication infrastructure becoming more sophisticated, the time-space gap is rapidly decreasing. The futurist Alvin Toffler is quoted as saying, "The illiterate of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn." This reflects the dynamic and volatile globalized corporate environment that exists today, and adjusting ESP programs to global corporate climate change will be important as English becomes increasingly relied on as the international language of business.

As the responsibilities of professionals in international organizations and corporations increase and become more diverse, students will continue to seek programs that will focus on their needs and maximize their precious time in the classroom. Unfortunately, as this demand increases, several programs will be established with only profits in mind. This is the situation with many flight attendant programs in Korea and there is potential that these fraudulent practices will seep into other areas of education. To effectively meet the language demands of international professionals in East Asia, universities and established language schools will need to evolve. ESP is still in its infancy as general English programs dominate the market, however, this is sure to change as ESP becomes better developed and defined.

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