

Outcome-based Program Design for a Business English Syllabus in the Post-Pandemic Era

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Abstract

Developing a fulfilling and comprehensive syllabus appears to be the prerequisite of any quality and well-balanced language program. It is a challenging task that many ESP (English for Specific Purposes) have to encounter at some point in their professional life. This paper is written to show the development of a Business English syllabus which can draw on information obtained from some recent alumni of the Business English program on the basis of needs analysis, a useful approach that can be effortlessly transferred. The focus will be placed on actual students' needs pertinent to the circumstances where students practically need English language skills and a threshold when students' learning outcomes reign supreme. It was concluded that by organizing a curriculum in an educational system around what is necessary for the students to be able to achieve would fulfill skills and knowhow they truly need in the real professional life, and yet the implementation of the revised syllabus needs further investigation to ascertain its spiraling, positive expected outcomes.

Keywords: Outcome-Based Program Design; ESP; Needs Analysis; Business English

Introduction

A needs analysis is considered as an approach of identifying and assessing the requirements, and goals of individuals, organizations, or communities. It is commonly used in various fields, including education and business, to determine what is necessary to meet specific objectives or address particular issues. Conducting a needs analysis involves data

collection, evaluation, and the development of strategies customized to the needs specified. Needs analysis has been a well-studied field since 1987 (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987) and is developed by many other educators, recently by Huhta et al. (2013). The notion of finding out about students' needs by directly asking them what they want to learn has been successfully applied to a number of ESP courses. However, with regards to the future needs of new cohorts of students especially after the post-pandemic era, it is not possible to perform sufficient need analysis simply because the new or current students lack the necessary insight into their future careers. Nevertheless, there would be certain areas where relevant information can be derived from these students, for example, concerning their level of English proficiency, strengths and weaknesses of their English skills, learning motivation, preferences, anticipations, and prospective jobs after graduation (Malik and Paswan, 2023). In fact, ESL educators have recently expressed interest in understanding the key elements that influence student learning outcomes and focused on the delivery of knowledge and skills necessary for ESL learners (Derwing & Rossiter, 2002). It is thus realized that learning is not just about knowledge delivery, as it encompasses a cognitive process of knowledge development, strongly prompted by the cultural, social and emotional aspects (Barak & Portnov-Neeman, 2013). According to Lixun (2011), increased pursuit for student learning outcomes has resulted in outcome-oriented teaching and learning, raising the significance of well-defined and achievable objectives for outcome-based education (OBE). These outcomes are primarily meant to reduce the gap between what the program offers and what the industry demands (Kaliannan & Chandran, 2012). It has shifted the emphasis of pedagogy from teacher to learner to support a true student-centered milieu (Tam, 2014). However, a study conducted by Yasmin & Yasmeen (2021) on the application of outcome-driven education in ESL to chemical engineering learners revealed that focal teacher training on OBE and adopting an integrated learning management system are in need.

Thus, inputs from recent graduates as one group of the major stakeholders would yield some valuable insights on various topics bound to be useful for future program development, including career advice and academic advice. Particularly, the new graduates can offer guidance on course recommendations and necessary modifications to make the courses more practical and modernized. Industry trends can be shared by the new graduates on the latest improvements and updates in their respective fields as well.

Published or tailor-made materials

Despite the fact that there would be a plethora of textbooks or publications in the field of Business English, there does not seem to be a single textbook that would aptly satisfy all the English language needs of certain target groups. Thus, when given a chance to modify or revise the syllabus and prepare new materials, the teachers of Business English are strongly advised to take the opportunity and contrive the new syllabus to the specific needs, particularly, of the first and second year undergraduate students. In case of a large program with many instructors, it is a good time to propose for such change.

However, when it comes to the option between using textbooks or customized materials for teaching Business English, it by and large depends on specific teaching goals and the needs of the students. Textbooks provide a structured curriculum and can be a time-saving resource for instructors. They often cover a wide range of topics and skills, ensuring holistic language development. Commercial textbooks are very typical pedagogical materials (Richards, 2001). Haycraft (1998) similarly agreed that textbooks are sensibly and affectively vital for students to measure their learning advancement. Some students even believe that textbooks have more reliability than teachers' self-developed textbooks (Sheldon, 1988). Nevertheless, the drawbacks of using textbooks in a language classroom should be noted as well. Crawford (2002) points out the textbooks might have unfavorable impacts on student learning. Some textbooks do not align with the students' levels of ability and culture ideals. Students could also rely only on the textbooks, constraining their ability and creativity to explore with interest in the target language (Foung & Kohnke, 2023). Another negative side includes the argument that some are contextually written which could eventually lead to controversies or misunderstandings in classroom learning.

Customized materials, on the other hand, allow the tailoring of lessons to the specific needs and interests of the students. Incorporating real-world business cases and industry terminology relevant to the students' prospective business professions is also favorably feasible. Furthermore, customized materials are more engaging and practical for upper intermediate and advanced learners of English. According to Oviedo Gómez & Álvarez Guayara (2019), materializing customized lessons attached to principles of second language acquisition gives rise to more language learning. In many cases, a mix of both approaches can be effective. A textbook could serve as a foundation supplemented later with customized

materials to address more specific needs of learners. Alhamami & Ahmad (2018) also recommended that EFL instructors as well as curriculum designers adjust and tailor textbooks to be compliant with learners' needs. It is suggested that teaching materials be used to enhance the learning objective, in view of the stated requirements of the students and the aims of the course.

Adopting Needs Analysis

A needs analysis was conducted in the form of a stakeholders' needs and satisfaction questionnaire survey carried out among recent graduates from the Business English program at the undergraduate level. Most of the items were close ended in which recent graduates were asked about traits and characteristics deemed proper for students of Business English at present. In addition, some items also inquired about courses or content that should be added or even removed from the program or certain courses on offer. They were allowed to express comments or suggestions about what should be changed to make the program better and more up to date. Some results were yielded. In terms of speaking, it was found that they would want to emphasize telephoning, teleconferencing via online communication platforms, product pitching, chairing meetings and negotiating. As for reading, critical thinking and reading in business English and reading integrated with writing skills were suggested.

The recent graduates were also requested to reflect on their past experience with business English classes taken and recommend possible changes to the Business English curriculum.

Changes to the Syllabus

Based on the findings from the survey on the needs analysis, a number of suggestions were made by the program's responsible faculty members. Eventually, the new syllabus implemented the following major changes: professional tracks were added so that students could choose the field of career they would like to work in, following their interests after completing the program; new emphasis was placed on internationalization (international exposure), soft skills as well as employability; digital skills and computer graphics knowledge became a significant component in the new program. On top of that, the notion of incorporating industry networks and partnerships into the program has been addressed and put into action as immediate needs of undergraduates studying in the Business English program. The instillment

of a lifelong, autonomous learning process into student learning was also undertaken. Internships before graduation would be given as an option for students looking to apply their knowledge and skills and gain experience in their designated career path.

Motivating Activities

Unlike professionals in the workplace who are intrinsically motivated, undergraduates are very often in need of external motivation to help them maintain interest in the classes, and thus achieve satisfactory results. It comes as no surprise that stimulating materials and exciting activities can help to achieve this objective. Role plays and simulations, particularly based on business drama series, are two activities that can be given as examples of successful innovation in the syllabus. According to Hoofd & Liangpanit (2022), role-playing activity can benefit language learners with respect to English speaking skills, vocabulary development, confidence boost and enhancing opportunity to practice English in day-by-day situations. Nonetheless, it is important that students have discussion time and explain what happened after the activities. Often, the activity leads to further outside-of-class and even self-directed learning since students can relate what they have learned in class to their real life experience.

In fact, other activities that enhance communication and language skills can be integrated, including grammar games in which grammar tasks are incorporated into games to make language learning more enriching. For example, a grammar quiz based on common mistakes in business correspondence can be created. For upper intermediate learners, debates on business topics can be organized to discuss current business issues, which inarguably allows learners to express their opinions and stances in English. Using a case study in teaching Business English is also desirable as it provides realistic examples, making the learning experience more enjoyable and practical. Students are thus allowed to apply language skills in authentic scenarios, complementing both comprehension and communication abilities. Tatyana et al. (2015) found that the application of active methods of teaching indeed helps to develop practical and critical thinking. The students can memorize and utilize the material given better and they are involved in the process of active learning. Case studies allow students to identify the scopes of a problem, realize positions, assess courses of action, and even discuss diverse viewpoints. Table 1 below summarizes the overall recommendations for the outcome-based program design for a Business English syllabus.

Focused aspects	Recommendations
- Published or tailor-made materials	Using a new revised syllabus with material options contingent upon specific teaching goals and student needs
- Needs Analysis	Prioritizing needs analysis of stakeholders and their satisfaction with the areas concerned
- Changes to the Syllabus	Undertaking innovative changes and initiatives to improve the program
- Motivating Activities	Encapsulating stimulating materials and exciting activities that are practical in real life

Conclusion

The revised course syllabus has overall shown that course design based on needs analysis of stakeholders can bring very reassuring, valuable results both to instructors and students in the Business English program. The embrace of needs analysis of recent graduates is also commensurate with the guideline of outcome-based education (OBE), which places emphasis on a clear idea of what skills and knowledge students need to have when they finish their tertiary study. It represents an endeavor to gauge learning effectiveness based on results or performances rather than on inputs such as time students utilize learning in the classroom. The student's learning outcomes comprise the criteria that the curriculum, teaching materials, teaching methods are holistically integrated.

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