

ENGLISH FOR STUDENTS OF ARCHITECTURE: A DESIGN PROCESS

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Abstract

This paper discusses the principles and process of developing a subject-specific course for students of architecture. By placing the professional activity of the architect at the centre of the syllabus the design-team tried to create a course that would develop language skills necessary for a future architect. The decisions on the balance of skills and task-types were made in accordance with this aim.

Working in a team had a number of advantages, one of the most important ones was that in this way the course becomes teachable for people with different teaching styles, which is particularly important in the credit system.

Keywords: English for students of architecture, teamwork in course-design, piloting a subject-specific English course.

The paper is about the design process and piloting of a subject-specific English course for students of architecture. First, I will give a brief account of the background and circumstances of our work, then focus on the principles we followed in designing the syllabus and on the process of collecting, choosing and developing the course materials. I will describe some typical activities, and write a few words about the course-evaluation and finally I would like to discuss the advantages of working as a team in course development.

The subject-specific English course for Architects is part of the language credit course system which has been developed at our Department in recent years. It builds on two kinds of core courses: General Technical English I and II and Communication Skills I and II. These courses are aimed at students in their first and second years, whereas the subject-specific courses have been designed for students in their later years, who have completed one of the two core courses.

Although a syllabus for this course for architects (similarly to other subject-specific courses, designed for students of the other faculties) had existed - on paper - for several years, it was the February semester of 1997 when the course really came into being, and was taught for the first time. Our task was to fill the syllabus, which was really an administrative

framework, with concrete topics, tasks and activities; to create a course that would meet the special linguistic needs of our students – future architects.

One of the most important features of our project was that both during the design process and piloting of the course we worked as a team. It consisted of Helen Noble, our British Council ESP advisor, and three teachers from the English Department, all of us having quite a lot of experience in teaching English as a foreign language, but just some general knowledge about ESP course design and teaching ESP. Therefore the task of designing an ESP course was a great challenge for all of us. All team members took part in collecting the materials and designing the tasks: I did the teaching and Helen observed the classes.

As I have mentioned above, we wanted to design a course that would help our students in their future professional lives. With this aim in mind we conducted a mini 'needs analysis' in November 1996 among the fourth-year students of architecture, asking them to fill in a questionnaire about the planned course. Although the scope of this survey was limited, it helped us to start thinking about the topics and tasks we might include in the syllabus.

The principle we followed in designing the syllabus was to cover all the most important areas of the profession, starting from the activity of an architect and moving from there outwards. We tried to answer some very simple questions, like: Who? Who with? When? Where? How? What? – all of them in reference to the profession. The answers to these questions gave birth to the following topics (units):

1. Architecture as a profession
2. The design process
3. Building materials
4. Refurbishment and reconstruction
5. Community buildings
6. Environmentally-friendly design

Each topic was designed for two weeks (there are two 45 minute periods each week), so that we could develop the themes as fully as possible. Unfortunately, the course is not long enough to cover all the aspects and relevant issues, as it is designed for one term only, which means just about 24 teaching hours, and the faculty's 'creative weeks' and the last week of the term, when students only work on their projects having no other classes, make the term even shorter. The ideal situation would be to have a two-semester course, so that we could include further important topics, like Recent Hungarian issues, which we do not have time for at the moment.

The topics we have included in the syllabus are quite complex in terms of their scope for language skills development. The first unit, Architecture as a profession, for example, contains the following activities:

1. An interview with a British student of architecture (listening task)

2. Job advertisements from *The Architects Journal* (reading for specific information)
3. C. V. writing (awareness raising and writing tasks)
4. Profiles of famous British architects from *The Architects Journal* (reading, note-taking, presenting)

As you can see from the first unit, one of the most important sources we collected our materials from was *The Architects Journal*, available at the University library. However, we did not want to use only reading materials - that would have made our course one-sided and it would not have reflected our student's future professional needs, so we were looking for other kinds of authentic materials, too. Some lucky chances helped our work, and I would like to mention two of them.

The source of the first was actually an article from *The Architects Journal* (FIELD, 1996). It was about the refurbishment of an international bank in Budapest (BKD Bank, No. 20 Honvéd utca), which was completed by a famous British architectural office, Fitzroy Robinson. Having won an international competition for this commission, the office opened a branch in Budapest and Helen helped us to contact them. We found out that one of the architects at the office, Nora Demeter, who was brought up and educated in the USA, was willing to answer our questions, so we visited the office and recorded an interview with her. Parts of the interview, when she is talking about an architect's contacts with the clients and contractors, we included in our unit on the design process. Our visit to the office had further positive outcomes, too, as Nora Demeter offered to give a talk for the students at the university.

She did keep her promise, and in April 1997 she came to the department and gave a presentation, illustrated with slides in front of quite a big audience consisting of our students, along with students from General Technical English and Communication Skills courses.

The other lucky chance I would like to mention is the so-called Marsham Street competition. Marsham Street is an area in central London, and in 1996 the British Government announced a competition to redevelop the area, including the demolition of the Department of Environment headquarters, three extremely ugly buildings from the sixties. We again discovered the announcement of the competition and some related articles in *The Architects Journal* (ALLEN, 1996). We wrote to the Department of Environment at the address in the announcement, asking them to send us a competition pack, which we could use in our course. We could not believe our eyes when the competition pack arrived; it contained a beautifully illustrated Urban Context Study, a competition brief, several plans and documents (DOE, 1996). We used this really authentic material in one of our most complex activities - a simulation of a competition.

Throughout the process of course design and collecting and developing materials we had to make decisions about the balance of skills and task-types. Although the course contains reading, writing and listening tasks, our

main focus was on developing speaking skills. Oral communication skills are very important to architecture students, because in real life too they have to negotiate with a lot of different people: their clients, other professionals, contractors and subcontractors (CAIRNS, 1997). In the next part of the paper I will describe three typical activities that show our emphasis on the real-life oral communication tasks architects do.

The first example is a role-play we used in the unit on the design process. Students take either the role of the architect, or of the client, future flat-owner. The instructions say that this is their second meeting, because it is in the second meeting that the architects have to talk more: they have to explain their sketches to the clients, whereas in the first meeting the emphasis is on active listening (SALISBURY, 1990). The aim of the activity was to practise negotiation skills – the students had to agree on some alterations to the floor-plans produced as a result of the first meeting.

The second task, which comes from the unit on building materials, was organised in the form of a panel discussion. The activity was based on an article about a school theatre built of timber (EVANS, 1996). As the article contained accounts from different professionals, such as a structural engineer, service engineer, and environmental engineer, the students were able to choose one of these professions and present a professional point of view during the discussion, which was led by a chairman. The aim of the discussion was to persuade the audience about the advantages of timber as building material. We designed this activity because in real life too architects are often required to speak in public.

The third activity is the simulation of the Marsham Street urban design competition mentioned above. The procedure of the activity (that comes in the unit on refurbishment) was the following: First, students read site descriptions and studied street plans from the competition pack. They had to design buildings for the area and make sketches, working in pairs. Their designs were copied on transparencies in preparation for the main part of the activity which consisted of short presentations on their projects showing their sketches on OHP-s.

This motivating and successful activity helped to prepare their final assessment. The assessment consisted of two parts, written and oral. In the written part students had to write site descriptions for Marsham Street projects. The oral part of the assessment was a presentation on any kind of building, based on an article they were free to choose. They had to use some kind of visuals, so the competition activity gave them feedback on their performance and was a kind of preliminary study for them.

We tried to build up the tasks in such a way that students could recycle certain skills, but each time their performance had to be at a more complex level. For example in the first unit they gave 'presentations' about famous architects working in pairs, and their 'talks' were based on notes they took from some articles; in the fourth unit, the competition activity, they gave mini-presentations on their own projects in pairs; whereas in the

final assessment they had to give fairly complex presentations, using visuals, working on their own.

I would like to mention some difficulties we came across in connection with these 'real-life' activities. Firstly, in several cases we found that there was some tension between real-life time and class-time. We tried to imitate in class some of the activities of real architects to stimulate authentic speaking activity, but sometimes there was not enough time for the students to feel happy with their performance. Secondly, students were not always happy with the visuals we brought into class (for example, with floor-plans which we copied from magazines), so in the future we plan to use their own designs more extensively.

As well as the informal feedback they gave, the students provided us with more structured feedback by completing an evaluation sheet in the middle of the term. It helped us to decide whether we were moving in the right direction, and to make some adjustments. The final evaluation, completed by the students at the end of the term, showed that our basic choices were correct. The students appreciated our efforts to make a useful and interesting course; they liked the variety of tasks, and that they had to speak a lot. They thought the video materials we used were interesting and relevant, and as a whole found the course useful and instructive.

All the activities I have described and the whole process of course and materials design were the result of a team work, and I would like to discuss the advantages of working this way. As I mentioned earlier, for the team members it was a new, challenging opportunity to design an ESP course and the support of an experienced ESP teacher and course designer, Helen Noble, was very important for us. At the same time Helen did not 'direct' our work in the traditional sense of the word. She did not give us explicit instructions, but gave us background information, a lot of encouragement and waited patiently until we took the initiative into our hands and came up with our own ideas. This way we acquired much deeper knowledge about the design process and gained a lot of confidence, too.

The team work itself was a two-sided process: it included working together as a design team and having Helen as an observer in class. Architecture as a profession, the first unit, was prepared jointly by the team. Each of us contributed to it, either by collecting the materials, or designing some tasks. This common work, guided by Helen, gave us more idea of the methodology of course design. Later on, each member of the team took responsibility for one or two further units. We had to select the core material, design the structure of the lesson and write the exercises. As the teacher, I had to try out quite a lot of different tasks, some of them designed by my colleagues. This was one of the advantages of team work: the variety of tasks the course contains. It widened the range of our resources, too. One of my colleagues was especially good at finding video materials, and she brought other authentic materials - brochures, manuals, PhD students project-work, too. A further advantage of this method is that in this way

the course becomes teachable for people with different teaching styles, which is particularly important in the credit system where a different teacher may teach the course from one semester to the next (NOBLE, 1994).

I have already mentioned that Helen observed most of the classes. The aim of her observations was to find out how our materials worked, how students reacted to them and how the group dynamics developed. For me it was a very enriching experience, in that we were able to discuss each lesson right after it had finished and I could get immediate feedback on everything that happened in class, as well as gaining ideas for possible adjustments to the materials.

As a conclusion I can say that for us, team members, this process of 'learning by doing' was a rewarding and a useful one. We have all learnt a lot about the methodology of course design, and also about the benefits of working as a team. The course itself needs some improvement and adjustment – which is quite natural. This is exactly what I am doing now, when teaching the course for the second time. Overall, we think that the course – subject-specific English for students of architecture – is a viable one and we hope that our students will be able to benefit from it both at present and in their future profession.

This paper is based on a co-presentation I made with Helen Noble, the British Council ESP advisor at the TUB English Department, at the 7th annual conference of IATEFL-Hungary (International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language), on 4th October 1997.

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