

Meeting professional needs: Teaching English to two medical doctors¹

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Abstract

In this article I share the experience of meeting the needs of two Mexican medical doctors. Colleagues facing similar situations may learn about these two cases' needs and incorporate some of my teaching practices to meet these needs into their own teaching experience. Moreover, they may also take into account the issues of identity and tolerance brought up during these lessons.

Introduction

My experience as an EFL teacher has been in general English and in academic writing. My interest in teaching English for specific purposes (ESP) came about when I had the opportunity to work with two medical doctors who wanted to improve their English. This experience became unique and relevant for my growth as a teacher. Thus, I deemed it important to share my experiences in this article with the intention that colleagues in similar situations incorporate into their teaching practice those features which they find relevant. Firstly, I discuss the methodological approach and techniques I used to find out what these students needed, their professional backgrounds and their experiences with studying English previously. Secondly, I write about what I did in order to satisfy these needs as well as discuss several additional issues raised during the lessons. Finally, I include my considerations and conclusions.

The main concern of both doctors was not really to learn general English per se, i. e. communicative grammar or listening practices for everyday situations (for instance, how to order in a restaurant; how to express agreement or disagreement; how to make requests, etc.). On the contrary, they asked for more specific lessons related to their professional development--the pronunciation of medical terms and expressions used in a formal presentation, and for lessons related to writing for academic purposes. I felt that a textbook would not be necessary to help cover both of the students' needs. Rather, I thought it would be useful to prepare material and activities based on my observations of the doctors' needs as the course developed during the lessons.

Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) indicate that we have an ESP (English for Specific Purposes) course when there are particular needs in the students for learning a foreign language. Teachers base their course on the needs that they have previously identified in their students in order to adequately satisfy these needs. Another aspect of an ESP course is that its objective may revolve around developing specific "skills." The teachers believe students have to learn reading or writing skills, for instance, so they may plan lessons to develop these particular skills. An ESP course is also associated with the homogeneity of a class group within a certain specialty. In this case, a group may be formed with students interested in Business English, or Academic English, or TOEFL preparation, or students in similar disciplines, such as engineering, medicine, finance, or accounting (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987) may form a group.

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However, I find it difficult to categorize my lessons as ESP in the strict sense although they may possibly fall into the first type mentioned above. Both of my students stated their specific needs, but as I carried out the lessons and from my observations I realized that the students also had needs which may be categorized as general English. For example, as I will discuss later in this paper, one of the students felt she needed to learn some formulaic expressions for making polite requests (*Could you please...? I was wondering if...?*). In my experience these are taught in a general course of English. In this sense, I can say that my lessons were partly focused on lessons related to ESP and partly related to general English as well.

Methodological approach

The idea of undertaking a study to identify specific needs and providing for them came about when the two doctors contacted me for tutoring. When I realized the relevant aspects that these private classes and the interpretation of the data would provide about the usefulness of teaching for specific purposes, I asked the two doctors if I could more fully explore their needs for learning specific English. In this way, I would be able to make a contribution of my reflections to the field of ESL/EFL teaching.

What I found led me to reflect on my teaching practice. This is what Allwright (1991) calls a "horizontal approach to professional development" in which, in this case, other teachers can decide the usefulness of my findings by discussing them and working together so that they can make the most of them for their own classes. Moreover, what I did may be called "practitioner research" in that I sought to incorporate my findings into my own teaching practice and development of teaching EFL (Allwright 1997). I thought it useful to look at both doctors as case studies because I could learn about their specific needs, beliefs, problems, concerns, and language proficiency in a real-life context (i.e. giving oral presentations and preparing for study abroad), find ways to meet those needs, and share this experience with other colleagues.

My main concerns were:

1. What specific needs do both doctors have for learning English?
2. What kinds of lessons can help them to meet those needs?

These two questions were the primary focus of my study. As I was learning about the students' needs, I planned lessons which targeted those needs. For example, one of the doctors expressed the need for giving oral presentations, so I asked the student to prepare several short oral presentations. These would help me see what further specific needs she had and what useful feedback I could give her.

The medical doctors' backgrounds and learning needs

The two medical doctors worked for Conasida (The National AIDS Institute) which is the Mexican government's public institution for research on HIV, and both attended HIV-positive patients. The two of them had carried out research, treated patients and held prominent administrative positions in that institution. In addition, both doctors had worked collaboratively with doctors from the United States on research. Hence, these students were not ordinary students wanting to learn everyday English. They were professionals with solid foundations in medical science. They had considerable experience and expertise in their field and had a clear view of what they needed in relation to their English lessons.

My first student², Martha, had studied English about 3 years previously at a language school for only a short time, but with little success.

Tomé un par de niveles... Y no me gustó mucho porque iban muchos jóvenes que nada más iban a echar relajo. Y era mucho el esfuerzo para lo que yo obtenía, y no me convenció, porque el beneficio era poco...

I took a couple of levels.... and I didn't like them much because young people attended and were only there to have fun. The effort was too much from what I got and it didn't convince me because the benefit was little...

The reason was that the students in the group were younger and did not take the class seriously. This made her feel uncomfortable so she decided to quit after taking only two levels. According to Martha, what had really contributed to her learning of the language was her reading of medical literature in English.

Yo pienso que básicamente leyendo los documentos de la carrera de medicina que la mayoría está en inglés y durante la residencia todo está en inglés, lo que usamos de soporte, y nosotros tenemos que traducirla, resumirla y presentarla...

I think that basically reading documents of medicine because most of them are in English and during the internship everything is in English, what we use as support, and we have to translate it, summarize it and present it...

Another contribution was the joint research she had undertaken on the HIV population in Mexico with her US colleagues. She and her US colleagues would exchange information, discuss aspects related to the research, and email each other in English. As a consequence of this joint participation she was asked to present the results of the research at an international congress on HIV in Berlin, Germany and in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Yet, she felt she needed to improve her speaking abilities for giving oral presentations before actually going abroad. This was going to be her first time to give a talk in English.

Yo nunca había dado una exposición en inglés ... obtener una fluidez en la conversación en inglés para poder yo estar en condiciones de hacer una presentación en Berlín, evidentemente para esto se necesitan de una serie de elementos de vocabulario y de construcción de frases.

I have never given a presentation in English... to obtain fluidity in conversation in English to be able to give a presentation in Berlin. Of course for this you need a series of vocabulary elements and phrase construction.

My second student, Pedro, was accepted into a graduate degree program at Emory University in the United States. He was going to pursue a Master's Degree in Science, so he felt that he needed to improve his academic writing. He did have experience in academic writing in Spanish as he had written a book on AIDS. He also had 25 years of teaching experience at the UNAM (National University of Mexico). His principal experience with English was through reading specialized literature in the medical field. He had taken courses in general English at a well-known language institute in Mexico City but had not taken any courses related to specific medical English. When applying to Emory University to study for the Master's program in Science and Research, he took the TOEFL on which he obtained the required minimum score of 500 to be accepted into the program. Yet, he had done poorly on the

²The students' real names are not used in this article.

writing section, obtaining a score of only 2.5 out of a possible 6.0; therefore, he wanted to have more preparation in writing before going to study abroad.

Mi mayor expectativa es aprender a redactar mejor, es muy importante para el profesionista, tanto en español como en inglés. Secundariamente hablar el inglés. Pero creo que hablar y aprender a escuchar el inglés es solamente cuestión de práctica si uno tiene nada más las bases fundamentales, la gramática, la estructura, pero escribir el inglés es la habilidad más difícil... Saqué 500 puntos en el TOEFL, mi mejor área es reading, y el área más débil era listening, en writing saqué 2.5 de 6 que no es nada bueno yo considero que lo sereno es un 4 y también considero que no iba específicamente preparado para el writing porque yo insisto, esto me parece que es lo más difícil, y grammar...

My main expectation is to learn to write better, it's important for a professional, both in Spanish and English. Secondly, speak in English. But I think that speaking and learning to listen in English is a matter of practice, if you have the basic foundation, the grammar, the structure, but writing in English is the most difficult skill... I had 500 points on the TOEFL, my best area is reading and the weakest area was listening. In writing I had 2.5 of 6 which is not good. I think that middle ground is 4 and I also think that I was not prepared for the writing [section] because I insist it's the most difficult and grammar...

As we can see, each of the two students had specific needs. On the one hand, Martha, had to give oral presentations, so she wanted to develop some abilities related to oral academic presentations, such as the pronunciation of medical terms, and the construction of phrases or sentences used in starting and concluding presentations as well as in asking questions. On the other hand, Pedro wanted to improve his academic writing. The ideal teaching situation would have been to give each of them separate lessons, but due to the students' time constraints I was not able to do this. The problem then was to balance the lessons in order to provide equally for both of the students. What I did was to focus the first part of the lessons on Martha's needs and the second part on Pedro's since both were medical doctors, colleagues, acquainted with each other's work and they also wanted to take the class together.

Hence, in summary their needs were:

- a. to pronounce specific medical terms, such as *treponema pallidum* or *neisseria gonorrhoeae*, or *chlamydia trachomatis*.³
- b. to learn useful formulaic expressions for oral presentations, such as *could you...* or *sorry I didn't...*
- c. to develop more self-confidence when giving oral presentations
- d. to become familiar with academic writing conventions and vocabulary for academic papers
- e. to write ideas clearly in academic papers.

³ I took these words from Martha's handouts. Unlike Spanish, these words keep the original Latin pronunciation in English. For example, when reading *chlamydia* the *ch* is read as if we had a *k* in English. So my criterion for teaching pronunciation was based on the rules of Latin pronunciation (see Herrera Zapién (1984) for more on these rules.

The techniques involved

I carried out class observations to help me understand the students' needs and prepare my lessons. In each class I observed the students by writing down their comments about what they wanted to learn and what I thought they needed. These observations enabled me to focus on the students' specific needs, decide the content of the following class and identify any other needs different from those mentioned by the students. These observations also helped me to address some of the issues raised during the lessons, such as identity and tolerance, which I write about in each of the parts of the lesson sections below.

Another technique I used to gather additional information was an interview session. The reason for using this technique was that I wanted to have a clear understanding of my students' backgrounds, experiences, previous English learning, and the fulfillment of their expectations from the course. I also wanted to clarify and complement any information obtained from my observations. The interview with each of the students was between 20 and 30 minutes long and carried out at the end of class. The reason for interviewing the participants at the end was that their multiple activities did not allow time for an earlier interview. This factor did not affect the data collection process nor the research as the information to be obtained was only complementary.

The last data-gathering technique I used was the collection of some of the students' written texts. As we progressed in the lessons, I asked Martha to give me the handouts, the abstract and the templates of her oral presentations prepared by her US colleagues so that I could have a better understanding of what she was going to do. When Martha and I read these handouts together we only concentrated on oral aspects of the language to help her give a clear oral presentation. I did not specifically focus on written aspects of the language. On the contrary, for Pedro I did focus on written aspects. I asked him to give me copies of his email correspondence with the admissions officer. I also asked him to write two compositions in order to see his paragraph structure. All of these different texts provided me with an understanding of what both students were doing and what they needed. I was able to see the way Pedro engaged in writing and Martha in speaking, and plan lessons based on these texts.

The lessons

The students and I agreed on one-and-a-half-hour sessions twice a week for two months (24 hours total). These lessons had obvious time constraints, so I did not engage in more ambitious goals, such as trying to improve Martha's overall pronunciation, or expecting Pedro to improve mechanical aspects of his writing.

Lessons for providing pronunciation of specific medical terms

Martha expressed the need for acquiring clear pronunciation of words commonly used in the medical field. The purpose of working with teaching this aspect was not to eliminate the students' Mexican-Spanish influence in their accents, but rather to achieve reasonable clarity in uttering the words. For that reason, I worked with Martha by first asking her to read aloud the handouts of the presentation she had prepared for her conference in Berlin. Pedro and I would listen and provide feedback or ask questions in English. Pedro would ask questions related to content-specific aspects. I would focus on the language aspects. I repeated the words that she found hard to say and asked her to repeat them slowly. In this way, her pronunciation would be as clear as possible without forcing herself too much to obtain a

native-like standard accent. I think this view of not trying to emulate a native-speaker accent helped her to become more confident and feel less frustrated. I also suggested that Martha watch programs and documentaries in English related to science or medicine, such as *ER*, *Presidio Med*, or *Discovery Science*, so that she could listen to how some technical words are said. Yet, she had to keep in mind that she didn't need to pronounce them exactly as they were said in those programs/documentaries.

Lessons for learning useful expressions to help Martha with the oral presentation

Martha had also asked me to teach her some expressions to help her during the talk. For example, she wanted to know how to ask someone to repeat a question she might not understand during the question-and-answer session following her presentation. I showed her the use of modals like *could you...please* for polite questioning. I also taught her expressions such as *sorry /sorry I didn't...* which could be used for clarification, or *I'm afraid I...* which may be applied for communicating apologetically something that the listener may not like. In all of these cases I stressed the communicative use and purpose of each expression and the way these could work in different situations. I wrote them down for her and we went through them until I thought she could say them easily and that she was certain of their usefulness and communicative purpose.

Lessons for developing more self-confidence when giving presentations

Martha felt insecure about her English. She said that she didn't know how to speak "well." In other words, she found it difficult to construct some formulaic expressions or sentences or pronounce words clearly.

Para hablarlo tengo muchas limitaciones, porque trato de construir todo en español y luego traducirlo en inglés y me tardo mucho tiempo.

To speak it I have lots of limitations because I try to construct everything in Spanish and then translate into English and it takes time.

Most of the English she knew she had learnt through reading literature in her field, so she was able to handle the technical words and phrases used in medical English. However, she said it might be hard for her to be able to understand someone asking her a question or to be in a situation where she wouldn't be able to find the right means of expressing her thoughts at the moment of talking. Therefore, I asked her to give several talks about anything related to her field. By doing so, I believed she could take advantage of knowing the topic well and be able to handle the subject matter confidently. Any unclear sentence or expression would be dealt with at that very moment. In addition, I told her we would rehearse the actual talk she would give in Berlin. At the end of each talk, Pedro and I would ask questions. All of this practice would help her to feel more self-confident during the real presentation. What also helped her to feel more self-confident was her identity as a doctor because, as she explained, in her experience as a doctor she has had to show confidence and assurance to her patients.

Lessons for becoming familiar with academic writing conventions and vocabulary for writing papers

Pedro felt that he needed to improve his vocabulary in academic English. What I did to meet this need was to make a list of verbs and nouns commonly used in academic settings. The list included verbs such as *demonstrate*, *undertake*, *hold*,

assess, claim, outline, and nouns like *assessment, demonstration, research, and findings*. Then I asked my two students to choose ten verbs, look for a noun for these verbs and make sentences with them. After this we would look at the sentences and discuss them. This collocation activity helped the students to become familiar with vocabulary and learn how to combine verbs with other, related words.

We also discussed the view of writing as social interaction. In other words, we talked about the formalities and conventions that may exist in academic composition. Every time students write something there is always a social purpose (Camps 2000). By having this discussion, the students would understand the demands and conventions used in writing and would learn to recognize them (for instance, the organization of an essay, the utilization of headings or titles, the presentation of sources, and the structure of paragraphs) in order to be able to apply them in their own writing (Camps 2000).

Lessons for writing ideas clearly in essays and reports

Pedro expressed the necessity of writing his ideas clearly, so we went through some of the emails he had sent to the admissions office at Emory University. While doing the paperwork for enrollment, he was in constant contact with the admissions officer by email and we thought it useful to look at his email correspondence. As I went through the messages with Pedro, I was able to see that at first his emails sounded as if he were writing Mexican-English, i.e. using words, expressions and sentence structures commonly found in Mexican-Spanish, but transferred to English and these could have caused confusion in understanding the content. As we looked them over I showed him other means of expressing his ideas. For example, when writing an email to the admissions officer to advise her that he had asked for the transcripts from the university he had studied at in Mexico City, he wrote, "I have solicited the transcript to La Salle." I told him it would be better to say "I have requested the transcript..." I did feel, however, that his identity as a Mexican could and should be reflected in his texts yet, at the same time he also needed to be aware of the importance of clarity in communicating what he wanted (Ivanič and Camps 2001).

In all of this correspondence the admissions officer never mentioned that she was unable to understand Pedro's emails. It may be the case that she knew Spanish; therefore, she would have understood the Mexican-Spanish influence in Pedro's writing. Or it may also be the case that she had tolerance for Pedro's writing as is the case with many tertiary teachers of other non-native students' writing in English-speaking universities (see Santos, 1988 or Vann, Meyer and Lorenz, 1984 for further discussion of this point on tolerance). Or it may be the case that the admissions officer felt that she was not in the position of signaling mistakes to Pedro. Nevertheless, the feedback I provided Pedro when reviewing his emails helped him to understand the different options to "sound" like a Mexican and yet to express his ideas clearly enough.

I also asked Pedro to write two compositions about anything he considered interesting. I wanted to see how he structured his paragraphs, so his two compositions helped me to see the organization he used. To help him to have better paragraph structure (topic sentences, developing and concluding sentences, coherence and development), I first taught both students the structure of paragraphs in English. Then we looked at some medical readings taken from an ESP book on medicine and identified the topic sentences and we discussed the structure of the paragraphs

found there. Unfortunately, there was no additional time to ask Pedro to write more discipline-related compositions and see how he would structure his paragraphs.

Considerations

When teaching we need to take into account our students' own individual identities. It is important to learn about the students' background and professional development when teaching students with a college education. They may bring to their class a solid professional foundation which will undoubtedly influence the way they learn the language. It is also worth considering the issue of nationality. Teachers may not want their students to "sound" like native speakers of English, or the students may not want to "sound" like native speakers either, since the students' identity as nationals could be confused (Ivanič and Camps, 2001). Or they may be frustrated if they cannot speak or write like a native speaker. In writing, their identity as nationals may be reflected in the type of vocabulary or sentence structure they use. In the case of Mexican writers it is usually reflected in the combination of different types of long sentences or the use of "Anglicized" Spanish words such as the ones we discussed above. Another aspect to take into account is tolerance in real life situations. My experience in living abroad and the experiences shared by others show us that native listeners or readers of English are often more tolerant of a non-native speaker/writer than perhaps an EFL/ESL teacher. This could lead us to reflect on how often we need to really emphasize error correction in class.

Conclusion

I would say it is too soon to "measure" or determine the achievement of the objectives of the lessons given, but I believe the lessons were useful for the two students. I was able to cover the immediate needs they had in spite of the fact that the duration of the lessons was relatively short (8 weeks). I did not engage in more ambitious goals, such as trying to get Martha to obtain a more native-like pronunciation, or expecting Pedro to have written compositions with "perfect" grammar. I do believe I gave Martha enough input for her to be able to give an oral presentation in English. After coming back from Berlin, she told me that the presentation had been a success. The pronunciation lessons had been helpful for expressing the technical words clearly. However, she had not really been able to apply the lessons on formulaic expressions because she actually did not have enough time for the question-and-answer part of the talk. Pedro left to continue his studies abroad with at least an awareness of the different conventions used in academic writing and with a basis of how to structure a paragraph. It would be very useful and ideal to have a follow-up to see how useful these lessons on writing were for him. Unfortunately, this is not likely to happen at the moment, as he has just begun his Master's program and there has not been any contact with him since our last lesson.

This experience of identifying the needs of students may contribute to the teaching experience of colleagues who face a similar situation when teaching students with particular needs and may help them plan in accordance with those needs. It may also encourage the teachers to carry out similar observations for a particular teaching situation and, based on what they may find, to plan suitable lessons to improve the English of their students.

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