Hassan Bouzidi
MOROCCO

Between the ESP Classroom and the Workplace: Bridging the Gap

Since the launch of far-reaching higher education reforms several years ago, many institutions across Morocco have begun revamping their English for Special Purposes (ESP) programs to bring them in line with the needs of local employers. These reforms recognize the correlation between what students learn in class and success in their future professions. Therefore, a main objective of English departments is to ensure that ESP courses impart the key communicative skills that are most useful to graduates in their chosen careers.

An important component of an effective ESP course is a textbook that contains job-related English lessons. However, there often is a mismatch between the content of ESP textbooks and actual workplace language demands. To help teachers recognize and rectify the mismatch, this article describes a three-step method to (1) collect data about the needs of employees and employers, (2) use that data to evaluate classroom material—in this case an ESP textbook for English language learners who work in the local Moroccan hospitality industry, and (3) supplement the ESP textbook to make it more relevant to the employment setting.

The importance of English for the hospitality industry

French is Morocco's unofficial second language, and it plays an important role in commerce and economics. However, tourism industry professionals are aware of the status of English as an international language and are capitalizing on that trend. The hospitality industry has a special need for employees who can communicate effectively with the English-speaking clientele that visit their hotels and resorts and use services and activities they offer, including restaurants, conferences, and guided tours. From the tourism agent at the airport to the hotel receptionist at the front desk and the secretary in the marketing department, English proficiency is required to carry out business. In addition, large hotels require qualified translations of promotional material and interpretations of business meetings. Preparing students for careers

in the hospitality industry and improving the language skills of current employees requires an ESP textbook that teachers can use to teach particular language skills and forms of communication. Choosing an ESP textbook or determining the suitability of one already in use is accomplished by a needs analysis that documents the type of workplace English that employers and employees require by collecting data through interviews, questionnaires, and on-site observations.

Step 1: Survey of employers and employees

A workplace needs analysis describes the entire context in which English is used, including the skills, settings, topics, and relevant language functions. Official statistics about languages and language use in the workplace and other environments are not always readily available, especially in developing countries where such concerns are still considered a luxury. Where statistics do exist, the information is often too superficial to be of any use for instructors or students.

Therefore, to conduct a language needs analysis for the hospitality industry, I began collecting data by interviewing employers and surveying and observing employees. The resulting information created a framework by which to evaluate the ESP textbook and supplement it, if necessary, for the benefit of all the stakeholders involved: students, teachers, employees, and employers.

Results of interviews with employers

To gather data from the employers about their English language needs, I used a semi-structured interview format that asked a predetermined set of questions with follow-ups (see Appendix 1 for interview format). A sample of 44 hospitality industry personnel managers were interviewed. They came from three main leisure and tourism subsectors in the Greater Agadir area: hotels (24), travel agencies (14), and Agadir International Airport (6). The interviews revealed that most of the managers do not consider learning another language a priority for themselves, although they do consider learning a foreign language as indispensable for their employees. Following are some of the most important conclusions from the interviews:

- Many managers prefer hiring applicants with foreign language skills to better serve the growing influx of travelers from abroad.
- Nearly all personnel managers require knowledge of French, followed by English.
- Most employers (87%) said English skills would be a plus in applying for a job and would earn them a higher starting salary.
- Receptionists, telephone operators, staff at information desks, and administrators who know some English provide better service to guests and enhance their organization's performance.
- Most employees with English skills are offered a job in the reception area. Of the managers interviewed, 30% would consider employing graduates with English language proficiency at secretarial levels.
- The largest need is for receptionists, telephone operators, and tour guides to communicate in English with guests at hotels and airports. Communicative tasks include answering phone calls, taking reservations, and leading excursions. A lesser priority is for secretaries and other staff to read and translate business correspondence and promotional materials and to interpret at business meetings.
- On occasion, outside English translators are brought in to translate tourism information, correspondence with tour operators abroad, and technical manuals for new equipment, and outside interpreters are used for occasional meetings with non-French-speaking foreign business partners.
- No managers reported an in-house language training program at their organization. They prefer to contact outside language schools or institutes whenever they need new employees. The majority of managers (73%) stated that they encourage their staff to enroll in outside ESP courses. (This underscores the importance of offering quality ESP courses at the university level.)

Results of employee questionnaire

For purposes of the present study, I administered a questionnaire to a sample of 101 employees in the hospitality industry in the Greater Agadir area. (See Appendix 2 for the questionnaire.) These employees came from three main travel and tourism subsectors: hotels (66), travel agencies (19), and Agadir International Airport (16). The employees surveyed indicated that they used their English language skills quite often and for a wide variety of purposes. The employees were surveyed about (1) their position/duties within the organization, (2) their use of English on the job, (3) their level of English, (4) the areas where they need improvement, and (5) their future language needs. Following are the most important results from the questionnaire:

- Employees stated that their French language skills were much better than their English skills.
- Almost all of the employees view English as either necessary or very important for carrying out their jobs.
- The employees in the hospitality industry who most often use English are (1) personnel in the hotel reception area, (2) excursion tour guides, and (3) ground hosts/hostesses at airports.
- Some of the most important hospitality industry work settings where students find employment include (1) hotels and motels (receptionist, restaurant worker, valet, concierge, advertising manager, aerobics instructor, lifeguard, music show leader, theme park attendant); (2) travel agencies (secretary, tour leader, museum guide); (3) airports and airlines (arrival area and terminal attendants, airline cabin crews).
- The most important uses of English occur in face-to-face conversations, followed by telephone calls. Most reception area employees report that English conversational and rhetorical skills are essential to create a pleasant atmosphere when they greet and converse with clientele.
- Speaking and listening skills are far more important than reading and writing skills in the hospitality industry. However, most employees said they were better at reading and listening to English than at speaking and writing it. Translating and interpreting skills are used but are not as important.

Employee language proficiency

Questionnaire and observation data indicate that, in general, employees who use English as part of their daily routine possess an intermediate level of spoken English language proficiency and need improvement. Some employees also need to improve their English writing skills. Overall, the employees surveyed indicated the following problems:

- Employees cannot express themselves coherently or fluently in spoken English.
- Employees cannot understand native English that is spoken at a normal speed.
- Employees have an inability to recognize and express the specialized terminology of the hospitality industry.
- Employees confuse formal and informal language styles. For example, an employee might say, "Drop your bags. I'll take 'em to your room" to a guest who has just checked in rather than the more appropriate, "May I help you with your bags?"
- Employees are unfamiliar with important language topics and functions needed for effective communication with English-speaking visitors. Table 1 identifies some of the specific language topics and functions that are most important for hospitality industry employees.

Step 2: Evaluating the ESP textbook

After data on the language needs of employees and employers has been collected, the next step is to evaluate the ESP textbook. One of the commercially available textbooks frequently used by local instructors to teach English for Business is *International Express* (Taylor 2003), a general English course for working adults at different levels with student and teacher editions and audiotapes. This textbook's stated objective is to teach English for work, travel, and socializing. My goal was to evaluate the degree to which this textbook met the English language instructional needs as identified by the employers and employees in the local hospitality industry.

Table 1: Language Topics and Functions

LANGUAGE TOPICS
1. Geography: description of places and natural landmarks; distances
2. History: local historical personalities, sites, events, and traditions
3. Time: present, past, and future actions and events; duration of activities
4. Weather: seasons; temperature extremes; types of storms
5. Food and Drink: local cuisine; restaurant menus
6. Sports and Pastimes: local teams; parts of the body; leisure activities; games
7. Music: local bands; traditional musical instruments
8. Customs: festivals; holidays; religious celebrations

LANGUAGE FUNCTIONS

Interpersonal Exchange

- Greet and say good-bye
- Introduce oneself and others
- Begin and end conversations
- Ask for repetition
- Check comprehension
- Change the subject
- Interrupt appropriately

Professional Exchange

- Ask for and give information, suggestions, and directions
- Make reservations and travel arrangements
- Describe people and places
- Tell time and change currency
- Make polite inquiries about health, likes and dislikes
- Make apologies and respond to complaints
- Express regret and sympathy
- Make and reply to offers and requests
- Make invitations and give recommendations
- Raise and counter objections
- Create invoices, faxes, memos, and letters

A popular method to evaluate textbooks is through the use of checklists based on criteria such as grammar and vocabulary lessons, the appropriateness of topics, and the overall relationship to the syllabus (Ur 1996; Sheldon 1988). Although many items on different checklists will apply to most textbooks, in many cases there are irrelevant or missing items that complicate a textbook evaluation. It is therefore useful to scrutinize checklists and create an adapted version that is directly applicable to the textbook under evaluation.

Accordingly, I developed five questions to evaluate the suitability of *International Express* for teaching the English skills needed by employers and employees in the hospitality industry.

1. Does the textbook cover the language functions learners are likely to use in their future professional environment?

An ESP course such as English for Tourism helps students learn the English language functions they will encounter in the hospitality industry. Therefore, the textbook should match the learners' specific communicative needs.

Although *International Express* may be perfectly appropriate for a different ESP course, it does not entirely satisfy the communicative needs of the hospitality industry because there is insufficient presentation and practice of many of the specific language functions listed in Table 1.

2. Does the textbook cover the topics/situations learners are likely to encounter in their future professional environment?

When preparing the content for a course, teachers must draw up an inventory of topics and situations that are relevant to students' needs and are likely to motivate learning. By the time students graduate, they should be able to carry out the basic communicative tasks required in the hospitality industry. Many of the useful topics in Table 1 either are not covered at all or are presented so generally that they are not relevant to the hospitality work environment.

For example, the contents of Unit 3: *Chairing a meeting*, and Unit 6: *Giving talks and presentations*, are more suitable for employees in managerial positions. They are not useful for students who are starting their careers at the bottom of the ladder as receptionists, tour guides, or waiters/waitresses. At this stage in their careers, students are less likely to find themselves in situations where they have to organize meetings, give presentations, or engage in high-level negotiations.

In addition, *International Express* targets an international business audience and does not make ample reference to the pertinent hospitality industry context. It apparently assumes that the lessons in the textbook are transferable and therefore suitable for all sorts of business contexts.

3. Does the textbook emphasize the linguistic skills most needed in the Travel and Tourism industry?

The textbook places a strong emphasis on listening and reading, and its audio component provides plenty of listening input, so there is a lot of opportunity for students to improve this skill. Authentic reading passages, taken from a variety of sources, introduce the theme of each unit, and there are integrated writing tasks. However, the textbook fails to focus on speaking, which is the language skill most needed in the hospitality industry, as reported by both the employers and employees in the survey.

Each unit of the textbook also contains a "language focus" section that deals with basic grammar points. These sections are not entirely useful for students studying English for Business in general or English for Tourism in particular because these students have studied grammar during their first two years at the university.

4. Does the textbook content adequately reflect local and target language cultures?

The lack of culturally relevant content in any textbook is detrimental to students' motivation. Students may feel alienated when everything in the book is happening to people with foreign names and is taking place somewhere else. A student could be forgiven for asking, "Where am I in all this?"

Students' self-confidence and motivation are boosted when instructional material is directly relevant to their culture and way of life. The selection of textbook content should take into account the cross-cultural dimension of the hospitality industry. Textbook writers and instructors have to keep in mind that future graduates will most likely work in a culturally diverse context. They should therefore aim to raise learners' awareness of culturally appropriate language related to music, sports, food, and pastimes, to name but a few. Students find the material much more exciting when there is something for them to identify with: "Marrakech and Ouarzazate" instead of "Venice and London," "tagine and couscous" instead of "fish and chips and tapas," and "doing business in Morocco" instead of "doing business in China."

International Express makes no reference to the French language and culture that have an important place in the Moroccan social fabric. Many businesspeople have been educated in French, and French continues to dominate as a language of wider communication. For example, hospitality employees in the Moroccan context would benefit from knowing that in English there are no equiva-

lents of *tu* and *vous* (informal vs. formal pronouns), or that in some cases you can address individuals from the United States or Britain by their first name, even if you have not known them for very long. Learners would also benefit from a set of French to English translation exercises.

The textbook also does not offer opportunities for students to demonstrate understanding of similarities and differences between their own culture and the culture of people from English-speaking countries. Students should, for example, be aware that the physical distance between speakers during a conversation is important for communication. When speakers stand close to each other in the Moroccan context, it is perceived as "being friendly," but the same distance might be disconcerting to a British or American traveler and would be interpreted as "breathing down their neck," especially when you have only just met them. Without a full awareness of other peoples' (and our own) attitudes, mind-sets, and ways of life, misunderstandings will prevail and communication will suffer as a result.

5. Does the textbook take into account local teaching/learning styles?

The textbook does not take into account the rote-learning style prevalent in Morocco, which students are very accustomed to by the time they reach the university level. Although teachers must introduce students to problem solving and critical thinking techniques, they should also exploit rote-learning abilities for vocabulary development. For example, the development of a glossary of major tourism-related technical terminology would let the teacher employ direct instruction and drills to help students learn important vocabulary. In addition, such a glossary would serve as a permanent reference tool.

Ongoing evaluation

The purpose of evaluation is to make sure that all aspects of instruction relate to the learner's needs as identified through interviews, questionnaires, observations, and examinations. It is important to note that needs analysis applies not only to the textbook but also to all aspects of a language program, including the teaching approach, activities, group work, and lesson plans. Most importantly, a needs analysis should take place at every stage—before, during, and after a course. This type of ongoing evaluation allows a language program to be continuously modified and improved (Genesee 2001).

Step 3: Supplementing the ESP textbook

In Morocco, as in many countries, students have limited exposure to English outside of the classroom. Apart from the few occasions where learners get to meet native speakers of English—mainly businesspeople and tourists—there is little opportunity to use the language. To compensate, English language programs must provide learners with a rich and diverse linguistic and cultural experience. Tomlinson (1998) points out that, when evaluating instructional material for language teaching, it is important to consider how interesting the content is for the learners, but it is paramount for the material to be clearly linked to the course objectives. If the textbook focuses on the linguistic skills employees need in the workplace, it will be useful. According to Alexander (1998), such usability is a principle that should guide the selection of instructional material.

However, no textbook is perfect. In other words, instructors will almost always need to supplement materials to a certain degree based on learners' specific needs. According to Allwright (1981, 9), "there is a limit as to what teaching materials can be expected to do for us. The whole business of the management of language learning is far too complex to be satisfactorily catered for by a pre-packaged set of decisions embodied in teaching materials." And according to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), if existing materials are found to be ineffective, they can be adapted or rewritten to reflect the learning needs and objectives that have been identified.

Based on the data from the employer and employee surveys, many chapters of *International Express* need to be supplemented with rewritten or adapted material to meet the needs of the English language learners in the hospitality industry. Teachers can take advantage of English language newspapers, magazines, and Internet content to supplement the textbook in the following ways:

- To be usable in Morocco, the textbook can be supplemented with additional

topics and language functions applicable to the local hospitality industry. Not only do students have to learn how to express these important language topics and functions, they also need lessons on how to use the correct language style to distinguish levels of formality as it relates to age, gender, social status, and setting.

- The speaking skill is very important in the hospitality industry, but it is the employees' weakest skill, and it is insufficiently dealt with in the textbook; this calls for the writing of authentic dialogues for group work and role plays based on the critical language topics and functions in Table 1. Some language topics and functions in the textbook are applicable to the hospitality context and can be used as is or can be slightly revised to adapt them to the local context.

- Reading and writing skills are a lesser priority for most employees, but these skills are still important; therefore, the exercises in the textbook can be adapted as necessary for practice in reading, writing, and translating promotional material and business correspondence.

- Because of the importance of French, the creation of a list of important tourism terminology in French and English would improve English skills by noting false cognates and terminological differences. Students will learn that a person from France using the word *smoking* might not be asking for permission to smoke but might in fact be asking for his dinner jacket to be ironed; that when an American says *à la mode* he may not be referring to the waiter's fashionable outfit but asking that his apple pie be served with ice cream; and that *cuisine* to an English-speaking person does not refer to the kitchen as such but to what is being cooked in it, especially as related to a particular nation's food and style of cooking, e.g., Moroccan cuisine and French cuisine.

Extracurricular supplementary activities

Supplementary activities also take the form of language lessons that take place outside the classroom. Many students are so distracted by modern communication technology that very few bother reading a newspaper or a novel. After doing the dreaded homework, many are glued to their television sets or computer screens where they surf the Internet for hours on end. Nevertheless, modern information technologies are an excellent means of getting students to learn. The teacher may give students homework that involves listening to a TV or radio program or reading a newspaper article on the Internet. In Morocco, even the most remote areas now have cyber-cafés, and English channels such as CNN and BBC can easily (and cheaply) be picked up using a satellite dish.

In my own English for Tourism class, I allow five to ten minutes of what my students and I call "Business News Bulletin." At the beginning of each new session (and before we get to open the textbook or any other material), "student reporters" tell the class about the latest issues in the world of business (especially issues related to the hospitality industry). Students try to consider questions such as these:

- "How is Morocco doing in its bid to attract 10 million tourists by 2010?"
- "Are there any new resorts being built?"
- "How are the airlines coping with the recent global financial crisis?"

These questions allow students to keep abreast of new developments and get used to the language of business.

I conducted a survey of 12 instructors who used *International Express* in their English for Business class. These instructors came from the Greater Agadir area and taught in a number of private language schools (7) and the local public university (5). The results of the survey indicated that although the need for supplementation of the textbook was clear, only a minority (27%) of the sample of teachers said they used supplemental materials. Of those using supplemental materials, 12% used text and pictures from general business magazines, newspapers, and newspaper supplements; 8% used free material available from business organizations; 5% relied on companies' websites; and 2% used off-air audiovisual material.

Conclusion

When choosing or being assigned an ESP textbook, teachers need to assess its useful-

ness. The steps to make teaching methods correspond with employment needs requires gathering data from stakeholders through observation, interviews, and questionnaires to describe the specific workplace language context. This data can then be used to evaluate the textbook and will lead to valid decisions for supplementing the textbook with extra material or activities.

Using the textbook as the sole instructional guide, from cover to cover, without any supplemental material, will not address the realities of individual learning situations. By getting to know the real needs of learners and their potential employers, ESP teachers can judge the distance between classroom material and the requirements of the workplace and be able to bridge that gap.

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HASSAN BOUZIDI holds a PhD in Applied Linguistics from Glasgow, UK, where he was an assistant professor in the Department of Modern Languages for two years before joining the Department of English Studies at Ibn Zohr University in Agadir, Morocco. He was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship to write *Marrakech Express*, an English for Tourism textbook, published in Rabat in 2007.

Appendix 1 — Hospitality Industry Employer Interview Form

Between the ESP Classroom and the Workplace: Bridging the Gap • Hassan Bouzidi

The primary purpose of the present study is to explore the extent to which the content of materials instructors use in their "English for Business" classes corresponds to the actual needs of the local hospitality industry. The results of this study will be of great value to all stakeholders: the learners, the instructors, and the hospitality professionals. I would appreciate it if you could take time to answer a few short questions. Your comments will be of great help.

1. What is your position within this organization?

2. What is the principal language you use for business?

3. How often do you use English for business?

    ○ Always　　○ Sometimes　　○ Rarely　　○ Hardly ever　　○ Never

4. Do you require English language skills of job applicants?

5. How fluent do applicants need to be before you can recruit them?

6. In which positions would you employ someone with English language skills?

7. Do you have an in-house translating/interpreting service?

8. Do you have an in-house "Business English" course?

9. If not, do you pay for your employees to attend a "Business English" class outside the organization?

10. Do you take your employees' English language achievement into account when promoting them to higher positions?

11. Which comes first on the list of your recruitment criteria: a "business degree" or an "English language degree"?

12. Please add any comments you feel are valuable.

Thank you for accepting this interview.

Appendix 2 **Hospitality Industry Employee Questionnaire**

Between the ESP Classroom and the Workplace: Bridging the Gap • **Hassan Bouzidi**

The primary purpose of the present study is to explore the extent to which the content of materials instructors use in their "English for Business" classes corresponds to the actual needs of the local hospitality industry. The results of this study will be of great value to all stakeholders: the learners, the instructors, and the hospitality professionals. Please answer the following questions and return your form to me. Your comments will be of great help.

1. What is your position within this organization?

2. How many languages do you speak?

3. Did you study business? In which language?

4. Have you taken a course in English before you started working for this organization?

   ◯   ◯

   Yes   No   If yes, what level? _____

5. Has your English improved since you started working for this organization?

6. Are you enrolled in a "Business English" class inside the organization?

7. Are you enrolled in a "Business English" class outside the organization?

8. How often do you chat with native speakers of English?

   ◯   ◯   ◯   ◯   ◯

   Always   Sometimes   Rarely   Hardly ever   Never

9. How would you rate your English?

   ◯   ◯   ◯   ◯   ◯

   Excellent   Good   Average   Not Good   Poor

10. Does your boss encourage you to improve your English? How?

11. In which areas do you feel you need improving?

    ◯   ◯   ◯   ◯

    Listening   Speaking   Reading   Writing

12. Please add any further comments you would like to make about the use of the English language within your organization?

Thank you for completing this questionnaire.