

Course Planning Assignment

Introduction

This assignment gives an outline of a twenty-hour exam preparation course with twelve ninety-minute and one two-hour session, which I designed for a group of five secretaries who wanted to take the Cambridge BEC Vantage in 2005. My students were working for different international companies in the area and needed English in their day-to-day businesses. Three were German, one French and one Polish. They all had considerable work experience. Three were thinking of changing their jobs and wanted to have a certificate to prove their level of English. None of them was asked by their employer to take a course. They all wanted to improve on their various English skills and were motivated and prepared to do homework besides attending the course.

The course took place in my classroom at home on Saturday mornings. They would be too tired in the evenings on weekdays, and I needed all their attention as the lessons were going to be very intensive. After deciding on a coursebook, I planned all sessions in advance, including homework, and gave each student a modified copy of the syllabus. Thus, they knew what to expect and could prepare themselves accordingly. As we would meet only once a week, I offered students e-mail support for queries that might come up when doing their homework.

The exam

The Cambridge Business English Certificate Vantage can be taken on six fixed dates per year at approved centres authorised for BEC. They are aimed primarily at individual learners who wish to obtain a business-related English language qualification. They are also increasingly recognised by companies as a way of assessing (prospective) employees level and skills in English¹.

Principles of course planning

Graves (1996) describes a framework of course development processes with seven components it should include. I followed this structure when planning my course using it as a checklist. The components are as follows:

1. Needs assessment

For my needs assessment, I wanted to obtain information about students' *objective* and *subjective* needs². For this, students filled in forms³ giving me factual information as well as information about their aims and perceived needs. One form was a questionnaire about learning styles / preferences.

I needed the information beforehand to be able to plan the course. Therefore, students filled in the needs analysis form at home four weeks before the course started. I used this

¹ Appendix 2- detailed information about the exam

² According to Nunan (1988) and Graves (1996) objective data is factual information (e.g. students age, nationality, first language and professional background). Subjective information is about students learner styles, preferences, attitudes to learning and their goals.

³ Appendix 3 and 4
DELTA full-time

as a basis for one-to-one interviews in which I also asked about their motivation for taking the exam.

Students also had to complete a sample BEC test (excluding speaking) to give me an idea about how they would perform under time pressure and how they would cope with the exam writing tasks⁴.

Three weeks prior to the course, we had a group meeting in which I chatted with my students about the outcome of the questionnaires, the exam and their common goals. They, then, had to interview each other finding out more about their backgrounds and previous learning experience.

The interviews, chats and observing the students during their conversation helped me to evaluate their speaking and listening skills. This was part of my task analysis⁵, which I did to find out about their strengths and weaknesses regarding their language skills. Reading and listening skills were assessed through the exam paper mentioned above. I also asked my students to bring some written samples from work. These were a collection of business letters, memos, reports and e-mail messages⁶. This gave me a relatively clear picture of their real-world writing skills.

Findings

Two areas they all needed working on were listening and speaking skills, especially long recordings and long turns in speaking. Some students mentioned telephoning as one area they needed practising. Reading was generally good but some made mistakes or could not finish due to time pressure. They had a good understanding of texts but needed training in reading and exam skills to be able to do the tasks in a given time. Knowledge of vocabulary was good, with one student being weaker.

Writing and keeping to the word limit were generally no problem as they had to write and be concise in their daily business. The range of language used was good with some minor problems, which I suspected might be due to fossilisation⁷. There was, however, lack of awareness of formal and informal styles⁸. Two weaker areas were task achievement (e.g. not including all points and adding unnecessary details) and report writing as not all of them had to write reports in their jobs

The French and Polish students' L1 seemed not to play a major role in their mistakes. They were proficient speakers of German and had learned English in Germany.

The outcome of the learning style questionnaire was that students seemed to be a mixture of visual, kinaesthetic and auditory styles, with two being more visual and one more kinaesthetic.

⁴ Some students are good at real-world tasks but have problems relating to exam tasks.

⁵ Nunan (1988)

⁶ These needed to be treated confidentially and I asked my students to change details to be on the safe side.

⁷ I arrived at this conclusion because the errors they made were those of lower level students although their English in general was high-level (*european, * we are writing you, * thanks for answering us)

⁸ Please, don't hesitate ... (use of contraction), thanks a lot/very much - mixed with very formal language (With reference to We would be grateful if you could ...)

All students were instrumentally motivated because they wanted to take the exam and become more proficient in English for their jobs. They were eager to start and willing to do plenty of homework. Due to this fact, they needed training in learning strategies.

2. Determining goals and objectives

Nunan (1988) defines “performance objectives” as, what learners should be able to do as a result of instruction. They also help teachers to explain their pedagogic intentions and signpost their destination⁹. He identifies four kinds of goals: affective, learning, communicative and cognitive goal. I identified two main goals for my students:

1. Cognitive: Passing the Cambridge BEC Vantage exam
2. Communicative: Becoming more proficient users of English

Looking at the results of the needs analysis and the requirements of the exam¹⁰, I defined following objectives:

General

- To provide a variety of activities for all learning styles and choose a book which supports and is appealing to visual learners
- To familiarise students with the book so that they could maximise its benefit
- To work through all units in the book
- To avoid a negative washback effect of the exam on the teaching by providing authentic tasks and personalising them

Specific

1. Reading
 - a) to provide practice in reading for gist
 - b) to provide practice in reading for specific information
2. Listening
 - a) to provide practice in listening for gist
 - b) to provide practice in listening for specific information
 - c) to enable students to listen and understand longer recordings
3. Writing
 - a) to raise awareness of formal and informal language in letters, faxes and e-mails
 - b) to raise awareness of the organisation of formal letters and faxes
 - c) to provide practise in writing formal letters, faxes, e-mails and memos
 - b) to raise awareness of the features of report writing
 - c) to provide practise in report writing
4. speaking
 - a) to enable students to state their opinion and give reasons, agree / disagree
 - b) to enable students to make and change arrangements
 - c) to raise awareness of and practise techniques for encouraging conversation
 - d) to provide practice in turn-taking and asking and answering questions
 - e) to enable students to talk about a range of business topics

⁹ This helps students to learn much faster than without knowing where they are headed (Mager: 1975 in Nunan 1988) and helps teachers in designing the syllabus.

- f) to enable students to ask for and give directions
 - g) to provide practice in speaking for longer turns (giving presentations, talking about themselves and their jobs)
 - h) to enable students to speak about obligation, possibility, recommendation
5. Exam skills
 - a) to familiarise students with the Cambridge BEC Vantage exam
 - b) to provide practise in proof reading
 - c) to provide practice in answering exam-style questions
 - d) to provide a simulation of the exam (mock exam)
 6. Grammar
 - a) to review and practise some grammatical structures
 7. Vocabulary / functions
 - a) to review language for
 - encouraging conversation, making suggestions, presentation, stating opinion, agreeing and disagreeing, asking for clarification, obligation, giving direction, fixed phrases used in formal writing and telephoning, discourse markers, linkers
 - b) to review and expand business related vocabulary
 8. Telephoning skills
 - a) to enable students to take and leave telephone messages
 9. Learner training
 - a) to provide training in how to note down, expand and learn vocabulary more effectively and help students become autonomous learners

3. Conceptualising content — selection of syllabus types

What is a Syllabus?

White (1988) defines syllabus as “the specification and ordering of content of a course”. There are some alternatives, like the *process syllabus* based on the learning process rather than on the content (ibid.), but they are experimental and have not had a great influence on teaching material.

There have been many trends in designing syllabuses following developments of different learning approaches and theories. Most coursebook syllabuses are *product-based*.

- *Structural syllabus*: Probably the most traditional approach based around a list of items (e.g. present continuous or comparative adjectives).
- *Functional or notional* (Wilkins: 1976) *syllabus*: Based around communicative functions (e.g. *apologising* and *making requests*).
- *Situational and topical syllabuses*: Based around situations (e.g. at the supermarket, at the travel agency) or around topics (e.g. culture, sports, music).
- *Lexical syllabus*: Developed after Lewis (1993, 1997) popularised the lexical approach¹¹.

¹¹ Discussed by Willis (1990). It is based on the assumption that language does not consist of grammar and vocabulary but of multi-word chunks.

- *Task-based syllabus*: Designed around various tasks such as problem-solving and finding information.

Most coursebook and materials writers have a multi-syllabus approach.

For this course, I decided on a combination of skills-, task- and topic-based syllabus as the main thread and a lexical-, functional and structural syllabus to support it. This choice reflects the objectives listed above. The exam focuses on skills, and task achievement plays a crucial role. Task achievement is also a need of my students in their work place. Different business topics need to be covered and knowledge of lexis and functions is tested directly and indirectly to achieve all tasks.

4. Selecting and developing materials and activities

The book

Cunningsworth (1995) gives a quick-reference checklist with criteria for evaluation and selection of a coursebook¹², which I used. I chose PASS Cambridge BEC Vantage¹³ as it is specially tailored to the needs of students taking this exam. It covers all necessary components to prepare students for the exam and gives students a clear guide-line of what is required of them. The book is relatively modular allowing for flexibility.

The content is well-chosen, relevant and interesting with real companies, authentic or semi-authentic material and real-life tasks. Often language in coursebooks is contrived¹⁴. However, in this book, it is realistic and used in business life. There is a section with essential vocabulary and functions at the back of the book.

Self-study and exam practice sections with a key are included after every unit, which is important for learners with interpersonal intelligence and encourages learner autonomy.

The book has a clear, modern layout using friendly, unobtrusive colours. It is not overloaded providing plenty of space for students notes. It is also visually appealing with carefully chosen, modern pictures (important for visual learners and motivation) and readable fonts, and the paper is of good quality and haptics¹⁵ (important for kinaesthetic learners).

Supplementary material

As the book is very comprehensive, there was no need to supplement material. However, I wanted to include material which would come from my students work life (real letters, reports, brochures, etc.) and also cater to the special needs of my students and their learning styles¹⁶. I also included some authentic listening material¹⁷. Some students had special

¹² Appendix 6

¹³ Wood, Sanderson & Williams. 2001. Summertown Publishing

¹⁴ According to a study conducted by Williams (1988), there was little agreement between language taught in a coursebook and language used in an actual meeting.

¹⁵ haptics [psych., print] is the technical term for the feel of something and is an important factor when choosing paper for printed material

¹⁶ See appendix 10 – cut-ups, cards, cuisenaire rods, coloured magnets, etc.

¹⁷ Mainly business podcasts from various sources - see bibliography.

The listening material in the exams tend to be more difficult than in the coursebooks (own and other teachers' experience and reports from students)

needs which were not relevant for the exam or the other students¹⁸. For these, I suggested some self-study books and material they could use independently outside the classroom¹⁹.

5. Organisation of content and activities

As I needed to cover all topics within a limited time and the book was well-structured, I kept to the order in the book. This gave me time to plan some additional activities, including one telephoning session, and adapt the material to accommodate my learners needs and learning styles. In the first lesson I introduced the book and spent some time on learner training and building rapport.

The main focus of the course was developing all four skills supported by vocabulary work, especially functional language for writing and speaking. Therefore, skills work was part of every session.

At this stage, students usually know the most important grammar to do the tasks. Therefore, I used a test-teach-test approach. Students did the self-study at home, checked their answers and we only went through “problem” areas together. I gave brief overviews and rules were appropriate and pointed out sections in Murphy (1994) for students to practise at home.

As students wanted to work on their telephoning skills, I planned one session focusing on it. This gave me the opportunity to introduce the telephoning self-study book (with a CD and key), which students could use in their own time.

Exam practice and skills was my second focus. This thread went through all lessons. Whenever appropriate, I gave tips on how to deal with a task and how it related to the exam. I frequently set time limits so they would get used to it. Students had to do the exam practice parts of each unit at home. I also planned special speaking and listening exam practice stages and read exam focus pages in the centre of the book as homework.

We dealt with different genres, their organisation, formal language and fixed phrases in the sessions. However, due to time constraints, most writing had to be done at home. Students were free to discuss their real-life business writings with me. They all had to write reports as this was a weak area for everybody.

6. Evaluation of students' progress

Again, due to lack of time, I could not include regular progress tests into the lessons. However, I set time limits for the reading tasks in the class to see how they did. I also took notes of students problems during speaking activities and gave exam-related feedback afterwards. The exam practice tasks which students did at home, gave me information about how they were doing. I asked them to stick to a time limit and note down their mistakes. Assessing writing skills took place continuously. Obviously, the exam was the ultimate progress test. Unfortunately, I know the results of only four of the students, three of which passed the exam.

7. Consideration of resources and constraints

The main constraint in this course was time. Because of this and having a fixed budget, I could not build in much flexibility. I tried, however, to offset this by offering online help

¹⁸ Additional grammar exercises, telephoning skills

¹⁹ See Appendix 10 and bibliography - material

through e-mail. For the same reason, students had to do a considerable amount of homework. However, this had been agreed on at the beginning and all students were willing to do that, and did so most of the time.

As the listening is usually more difficult in the exam than in the books, I sometimes skipped the listening tasks and supplemented them with authentic material²⁰.

Grammar was not a focus and there was not much content in the book. Therefore, I suggested students buy a grammar practice book.

To counter a negative washback effect of the exam on the course, I chose a book with authentic, real-life tasks plus a range of other material and activities to give students variety and keep their motivation up. It also helped that students needed all the skills and language work to become more proficient in their jobs, which was an immediate need and the second major goal of the course. There was, unfortunately, neither time nor resources for a complete mock exam at the end.

Conclusion

At the end of the course, I asked my students for feedback²¹. They were confident and felt well-prepared. They enjoyed the course despite its intensiveness. Main reason for this was that they felt it was well-structured and we had time for short personal chats. What they liked most about the course was a balance of exam preparation and actual content and skills-based work, support outside the classroom, my teaching style, which they found supportive and motivating, and the personalised tasks. What they did not like was the time constraint.

After the exam, students unanimously said that it was more difficult than they had thought, especially the listening part. Thus, my decisions of providing authentic listening material was correct.

Looking at it in retrospect, I can say that it was a successful course which was carefully planned according to the needs and objectives of my students and it helped me stay focused and cover all necessary parts within a very limited time.

²⁰ Business related recordings from the Business Spotlight and podcasts from the Internet (see material section in bibliography).

²¹ In Germany, students, especially when they paid for a course, are quite forthcoming with feedback. There was also not much time to do a written feedback. Therefore, it was done orally.

Bibliography

Material

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Smith, D. G. 2004. Short Course Series: English for Telephoning, with Audio-CD. Cornelsen
Business Spotlight – magazine for (German) learners of English. Spotlight Verlag GmbH

Letters, e-mails and reports provided by students

Needs-analysis form

Interview form

Past exam papers

Language games

Additional grammar exercises

Cuisenaire Rods / coloured magnets

Cards / cut-ups (of dialogues, language, paragraphs)

http://www.cambridgeesol.org/exams/bec_vantage.htm (course information)

http://www.cambridgeesol.org/teach/bec/bec_vantage/index.htm (teaching resources)

Authentic listening material (podcasts and other recordings from the Internet):

<http://www.smallbizpod.co.uk>

<http://www.manager-tools.com>

<http://www.smallbizpod.co.uk>

<http://www.business-spotlight.de>.

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