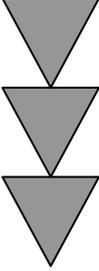# A THEORETICAL APPROACH TO
THE "ENGLISH FOR THE WORLD OF WORK" PROJECT

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This article aims at presenting an on going British Council English for Specific Purposes (ESP) project, which involves a number of vocational schools in the country. The article is structured in two parts: a brief presentation of the project followed by a theoretical part, which defines ESP and genre, relating them to the practical side of the project.

The project started in September 2003, covering a period of two academic years: the first year was devoted to introducing students to research skills necessary for identifying their future English language needs, while the second aimed at the development of ESP materials by the students, in accordance with the results of their needs analysis. The project has involved 19 schools from all over Romania, covering a wide range of specialisms. It consists in an optional inter-curricular course, linking language and communication with the different vocational areas of the participating schools, and bringing together teachers of English and of vocational-technological subjects.
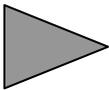
The English for the World of Work Project (EWoW)

The EWoW project involves teachers of English, teachers of vocational subjects and 10th – 11th grade vocational students in the country. The first year of the project aimed at students in vocational schools carrying out a small-scale needs analysis in

companies related to their future profession, with the purpose of creating a set of ESP teaching materials in the following year.

The needs were classified in terms of register (grammar and sentence level), specialized vocabulary, language functions (giving directions, asking for/giving information, etc.), skills (all four, but differently balanced depending on the needs of the respective specialism). Among the main needs identified were specific genres: business telephone conversations, job interviews, socialising, meetings, product presentations, etc. The concepts of register and genre will be discussed later in the paper.

The needs analysis was carried out by students with the help of their teachers by means of questionnaires and interviews administered to employers, employees, graduate students from their schools, as well as vocational subject teachers. Although the analysis was based on a non-probability sample, and thus does not claim to have yielded generalisable results, its strengths are relevance to learners and hence increased motivation to learn English.

During the second year of the project students and teachers were involved in the process of materials writing, paying particular attention to the needs identified. The teachers and students explored those needs and produced the following categories: study needs (e.g. using the dictionary, giving references), skills needed at the future place of work, vocabulary related to certain topics, and certain genres (as mentioned above). By further exploring the needs, project participants identified the schematic structure, content, style, and target audience.

The next stage in producing teaching materials was the pedagogical realization of the identified needs. One of the aims of the EWoW project was to make students aware of the differences between general English and ESP and to increase their interest and involvement in learning ESP. By creating materials for classroom use based on their needs analysis, the students have actually covered, in a schematic way, the process of course design and textbook writing.

The practical involvement of the students increased their interest and, during the materials writing stage, they collected and selected materials which were relevant to the needs identified. Based on the analysis of textbooks and text-types, students

produced their own tasks, considering the needs identified, usefulness and appropriacy of materials and tasks.
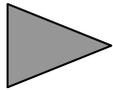
A theoretical approach to EWoW

English for Specific Purposes is based on the principle that certain discourse communities need a specific language for their professional needs. The concept of 'discourse communities' has been investigated, among others, by Swales (1997: 24-27), who describes it by identifying six characteristics:

a) 'A discourse community has a broadly agreed set of common public goals' (1997:24). In EWoW 13 discourse communities can be identified, in terms of agreed sets of common public goals, such as, telecommunication, hotel and catering, navigation, engineering, etc.

b) 'A discourse community has mechanisms of intercommunication among its members' (1997:25). In terms of mechanisms of intercommunication, Swales mentions participatory mechanisms (such as meetings, correspondence, conversation), channels of interaction (speech, writing), all members needing the same range of genre skills, approximately.

c) 'A discourse community uses its participatory mechanisms primarily to provide information and feedback' (1997:26). This characteristic emphasizes the importance of information processed in order to improve professional performance and to confirm / reinforce community membership.

d) 'A discourse community has a threshold to expert level of members with a suitable degree of relevant content and discoursal expertise' (1997:27). Swales identifies community members at various stages in their professional development, ranging from apprentices to experts. The project EWoW aims at bringing the vocational close to the threshold level.

e) 'In addition to owning genres, a discourse community has acquired some specific lexis.' (1997:26) The specialised lexical terminology, as well as the use of highly specific abbreviations and acronyms, is a clue that the person is a member of the discourse community. Actually, lexis is a feature that has occurred very often in the needs analysis carried out by the project participants.

f) 'A discourse community utilizes and hence possesses one or more genres in the communicative furtherance of its aims' (1997:26). The idea underlying this feature is that genres belonging to other communities may be borrowed, but

must be assimilated and appropriated. Each community has its own genre/s and discoursal expectations by means of which it defines itself. In our particular case, vocational students are beginning to move away from General English, to learn to make use of more specialised genres such as enquiries, technical reports, etc.

'Genre' as a linguistic concept has had various definitions and the concept itself has been covered by different terms such as speech events (Del Hymes), discourse, register, activity type. For the purposes of our paper we will use Swales' working definition of genre (1997:45-58):

> *'A genre comprises a class of communicative events the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognized by the expert members of the parent discourse community and thereby constitute the rationale for the genre. This rationale shapes the schematic structure of the discourse and influences and constrains choice of content and style. […] In addition to purpose, exemplars of genre exhibit various patterns of similarity in terms of structure, style, content and intended audience' (1997:58).*

As we see in Swales' definition, genre includes the following key elements: communicative event (in which an indispensable role is played by language or paralanguage), communicative purpose (why we use the language), a certain schematic structure (a prototypical structural organization of the event in order to be recognised as belonging to a specific genre), content and style. These features refer to the topics specific of various activities typical of the genre and the appropriate style. For example in the presentation of a PC model to specialists in the field, the presenters would use highly specialised language and an appropriate style. In this respect there are constraints on the allowable contributions of the speakers.

The features used to describe discourse communities make use of genre, register, goal, community and indicate the use of language for specific purposes. Actually, ESP has been approached by linguists in several ways and has shifted focus.

Hutchinson and Waters (1990) give a historical overview of ESP development. According to them the first stage is 'register analysis' by means of which

grammatical and lexical features of the registers were identified in various fields. The pedagogical realization of this approach was a syllabus that laid emphasis on language forms. Its drawback was that it focused on sentence grammar and few significant differences were found when compared to General English.

The second approach was the 'rhetorical/discourse analysis', which looked at the way in which sentences were combined in discourse to produce meaning. The concern was to identify the organization patterns in texts and to specify the linguistic means by which these patterns are signalled (1990:11). Again, no significant differences in the rhetorical organization of ESP texts as compared to General English were identified.

Another approach was 'target situation analysis', which moved from language analysis to the analysis of the situation in terms of communicative purposes, setting and means, language skills, functions and structures. In pedagogical terms, this approach was based on the needs analysis of the target situation. However, it was felt that the concept of needs was too simplistically defined.

The fourth approach, called 'skills and strategies approach', as the name itself suggests, was based on developing skills and strategies for learning, and the learners were required to use reasoning and interpretative processes to extract meaning. Hutchinson and Waters (1990) suggest a fifth approach that bridges the focus on language use with the focus on the process of learning.

As we can see, these descriptions of ESP can yield different approaches to course design and teaching materials from focus on language (structures and vocabulary), to text types and their rhetorical organization, to contextualised language and learning centered strategies.

All these characteristic elements are reflected in the EWoW project in a way that was considered to be more accessible to the students. In the pedagogical realization of the materials, students reflected on what people talk about, why they do it, how and with whom they communicate. Students have become aware that the style and organization of the communicative events change according to these contextual elements.
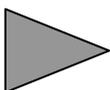
Conclusion

The EwoW project has certain innovative features mainly related to the new type of student activity within and outside school. In the first part of the project, devoted to the development of research skills through a small-scale needs analysis, students were assigned different roles inside and outside school - they designed and delivered questionnaires, went out to interview people, and assumed different roles in their teams. Moreover, students have become familiar with a different type of training in order to meet their future professional requirements - team-work, ESP, research skills, development of other types of skills.

The pedagogical realisation stage was devised in such a way as to make students familiar with different textbooks and various task types. Students were invited to analyse and evaluate them in terms of appropriacy and usefulness. Thus, students used both lower-order thinking skills (requiring knowledge/information, comprehension, application of knowledge), and higher-order ones (such as analysing, synthesizing, evaluating).

Teachers have also assumed new roles within the project - different types of teams have been formed between teachers of English, on the one hand, and teachers of vocational subjects and students, who acted as resources of specialist knowledge for the English teachers, on the other.

As indicated by the questionnaires administered to project participants, the project has been considered successful. Its results will be taken forward in various ways: student-produced materials will be used by younger students, materials will be published on the British Council web site, to be made available for other vocational schools in the country, the acquired skills will be used in the students' future professional life.

Finally, the project itself will enter a new stage: following a series of dissemination seminars around the country, other vocational schools are ready to take up the challenge and embark on a process of discovery and development that will benefit all the parties involved, bringing teachers and students closer together, and the schools closer to the real world.

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