

Operational Level 4: A Cuban Project

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Introduction

The training and testing of personnel to meet the ICAO Operational Level 4, has posed a particularly complex and difficult challenge for the Institute of Civil Aviation of Cuba (IACC). The main difficulties of the task arise from a combination of factors which include: the limited time available, the very large size of the target population, and the fact that we are not dealing with a regular process of general English Language Teaching alone, but in addition with a sector-specific focus (English for Specific Purposes/ESP) on English language learning for the aviation industry.

After the definition of a safety policy by ICAO Assembly Resolution A32-16, the development of the ICAO Language Proficiency Requirements, and the September 2004 Language Symposium in Montreal, the urgency of the task was clear, and a national monitoring group (following the model provided by the ICAO), PRICESG was created to determine the steps to be followed within our institute. Among the first steps taken were:

- the elaboration of a national strategy for the Cuban Civil Aviation
- a complete census of the target population for Operational Level 4
- The diagnosis of the current level of English of the target population
- The analysis of the different educational materials available for the teaching of general and aviation-specific English.
- The recruitment of teachers of English to complete the staff with the proper abilities to intertwine General English with aviation-specific English.

The National Language Group

After these initial steps, a national working team was created , (The National Language group) with the objective of designing and putting into practice a project with a set of activities conducive to the effective implementation of the training and testing of personnel to meet the ICAO Operational Level 4

The overall task of the group and the project has been to create a System of Language Teaching which could operate as a Learning Community to unite isolated teachers, and groups of learners and classrooms scattered all through the island. This group would also be capable of providing coherent national results in terms of quality of learning, and standardized levels of proficiency... The Group includes ESP specialists from the National Association of Linguists, teachers of English, retired aviation personnel (pilots, ATC controllers) who meet regularly, report systematically to the Direction of Training of IACC, and monitors all the activities of the project.

Activities developed

The activities developed so far, include the following:

A) Elaboration of a series of documents to be used as guidelines for the implementation of the project

- Strategy for the teaching of English in the Institute of Civil Aviation in Cuba
- Plan for the Preparation of teachers of English
- Language Teaching Program , 1,
- Language Teaching Program 2
- Special Teaching Program
- A system of testing instruments based on the specifications for the 4th Operational Level defined by ICAO.

B) Preparation of teachers

- Recruiting and hiring of staff at the Centre for Aeronautic Training, and Airlines belonging to the IACC
- Program of class observation of all teachers in the project.
- Series of methodology seminars, for teachers:
 - to unify criteria with relation to some aspects of the modern teaching of foreign languages,
 - to raise the teachers' awareness of the basic convention of ESP, which have not usually been the object of explicit teaching at teacher training institutions
 - to discuss, analyze, and recommend how to improve the problems detected in the classes observed
 - To become familiar with aspects and characteristics of Aviation English. These seminars are facilitated by pilots, air traffic controllers and other specialists in the field, and
 - To train the personnel directly involved with language proficiency testing such as language raters, operational raters, and interlocutors on the implementation of tests for the ICAO Operational Level 4

C) Other activities

- Identification and acquisition of the educational materials, for teachers and students, necessary for the development of the project
- Regular reports to all participating companies on the learning process, with recommendations on how to improve or resolve the problems detected...
- Application of the tests for ICAO Operational Level 4, to those pilots and air traffic controllers who are supposed to have reached that level already.

The ESP Focus

Apart from the theoretical debate on ESP, which has emerged from time to time (see for example Widdowson (1983.84) and Richards (1989), the discussion of ESP has moved mainly around the specification of learners' needs and the elaboration of syllabuses based on those needs.

These topics, however, as important as they are, do not exhaust the complex and varied aspects involved in a comprehensive ESP approach, which refers not only to the organization of *courses* but, more in the spirit of ESP, to the implementation of integrated elements in language teaching *projects*.

Among the many aspects involved in an ESP strategy for language teaching, some of which have been traditionally neglected, we would like to mention four. These have been selected because of the decisive role they play in the final learning outcomes expect of high stakes or “high surrender value courses” (Corder, 1975), as typifies ESP courses.

The first is what we would like to call: “the *process of immersion*”, the second, “the *teacher’s attitude*”, the third “the *organization of the teaching-learning process*”, and fourth, *the monitoring of the process*.

Process of immersion

The first element, the process of immersion, is the necessary process that must be created by teachers or specialists involved in an English for Specific Purposes Program. This goes far beyond the mere inclusion of technical words or the specialized language of the field, as it is sometimes understood. It means, instead, penetration of the environment where the teaching learning process is going to take place, and it has to do with a variety of aspects, ranging from characteristics of the learners (age, education, cultural level, etc.) to problems of organization of classes, (days, hours, duration, etc.) and/or grouping of students by jobs, work shifts, or levels. The main difference here from traditional General English courses is that they do not take place in an educational setting (a school, an institute, or any kind of study centre),

At the same time, the situation in which the foreign language is going to be used may be completely unknown to the ESP teacher or specialist. If he/she wants to incorporate those situations into classroom practices, language behavior and learning materials, he/she has to understand from an ESP perspective the purposes, the contents and the rationale for meaningful interactions and situations, that is, he has to somehow experience them, at least through observation, but much better through direct participation, and become familiar with their discourse (s) before approaching curriculum design or teaching.

The difference between an Immersion Process, in the way we use the term here, and a Needs Analysis or a Target Situation Analysis (Chambers, 1980), for ESP is the difference between an observer of linguistic elements to be incorporated into a syllabus and an observer of pedagogic elements to be taken into consideration in the teaching learning process. This difference holds true even when taking into account the detailed profile of learners’ needs designed by Munby (1978). Both procedures – the Target-Situation Analysis and the Immersion process are useful and necessary tools, not contradictory but rather complementary as important features in an ESP development project.

Organization of the teaching learning process

This is perhaps, the most difficult aspect of the project. Regular English Language Learning courses most often take place in an educational setting, while ESP courses take place mostly in a work setting, where the teaching learning process is inserted as an extraneous and sometimes conflicting professional duty. The schedule, the class hours, the change of shifts by some workers, etc., may interfere with the normal work process taking place in the centre. The day-to-day operation of the profession, ironically, may require, yet not be able to support the development and implementation of the necessary ESP Program/

In the specific case of aviation, it is not easy to adapt the characteristics of the work of pilots, and air traffic controllers, to sequences of regular classes, with a fixed schedule.

According to the experience so far, there can not be a national schedule for the language classes, and different companies have to look for different solutions. These might include:

- Classes every other week, according to the flight duties of the crew. These classes, however, can be intensive as much as 4 to 6 hours, five days a week. As a complement, homework and individual tasks are assigned to be done in the free time they have between flights, or at airports waiting for the shift of crew.
- Intensive periods of classes, for two or more consecutive weeks, when they are not flying for more than one consecutive week...
- Classes twice a week, which are repeated on consecutive days, so as to provide opportunities for those who could not attend one day, to attend on the following day.

This last variant has not proved very effective, as it creates a very difficult problem for the teacher. From a teacher perspective, facing a mixed of students, some of whom attended the previous class, while others did not, does not permit effective planning or relationship building among students, which is becoming more and more important in theory of language learning and teaching.

As a whole, there must be a solution for each particular situation, so that the systematic nature of the learning process is preserved.

Teacher's attitude

The creation of a learning community can only be reached if we consider the community as an interaction taking place between equals, that is, between professionals. The teacher of English is a pedagogical professional; in addition, the students in the groups are not traditional students in an English class, but they are also professionals. In this case, professionals in air transportation, with many years of experience in their field of expertise. The teacher can help in the area of teaching and improving their use of English, and the students can contribute their knowledge of the aviation environment, and the particular forms of language that are required in the circumstances where the language is used. We could say that they are two professionals who complement each other in a very important and indispensable way in the striving for the common goal of learning.

Monitoring of the process to maximize learning

Initial processes of classification of students are precisely that: initial. There will always be differences among students, which may or may not be captured. Therefore, you cannot simply wait for courses to finish without an interim monitoring component.

In the best interest of the students and organizations, it is necessary to detect those students who are the most advanced in each group and those who could advance at a faster pace. If these students were placed in special groups with special programs that move them more quickly towards their outcome of successful completion of Operational Level 4th, and if these groups were organized with the objective of presenting those students to the test in a shorter time than what they would normally take, a number of the scheduling and pedagogical issues mentioned earlier would be resolved.

This monitoring strategy would allow for a number of students to obtain their certificate sooner. It would a) reduce the number of students in regular groups, b) provide the possibility of re-arranging the rest of the groups, based on more complete linguistic information, c) maximize the expertise of prepared teachers and d) on the whole, by accelerating the whole process of learning, make better use of the limited English language teaching time generally available to students and teachers in ESP programs.

Final remarks

At present, a high percentage of our target population is currently enrolled in the English Language Programs.

With the development of the program for the preparation of teachers, the additional experience gained by these teachers in Aviation English, and the interest and support given by IACC in the fulfillment of this task , we advance everyday towards our goal.

We feel we are more prepared to face and solve the problems we encounter, and we feel optimistic about the final outcome of our efforts.

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