

Research Inputs To UMSEP Course Design

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Introduction

It was one of the basic premises in the conception of UMSEP (University of Malaya Spoken English Project) that course design should rest on a foundation of research. Research was necessary in order to ensure that our final courses have the following characteristics.

- (i) They should be relevant to students' **communication needs** as future professionals.
- (ii) They should be relevant and responsive to students' **learning needs** as students.
- (iii) They should take account of students' **needs as people** each with a particular personality and interest in the world around them.
- (iv) They should have '**face validity**' and appeal to people in the professions we are aiming at.
- (v) They should be **innovative** and propose original and more appropriate solutions to familiar problems.
- (vi) They should be **usable** (that is, take account of practical constraints such as resources, staff and the administrative system in the university).

In line with this premise, four primary inputs to course design were identified upon which our research converged. These were targets (needs, skills, professions, professional activities etc.), learners, language and learning. The preparatory research work of UMSEP therefore covered areas such as learners' communication needs, psycho-sociological factors, the learning situation, assessment of language proficiency as well as investigations into spoken discourse and teaching/learning methods.

Research areas

Research work was organized in seven areas or 'projects'. Below is a summary of these projects.

Situation analysis

The situation analysis, although it did not have direct bearing on course design, was of very great importance in that it provided an indication to team members of key factors in the situation within which they were working. It also provided facts and figures for subsequent use and identified sources of information for future needs. The analysis covered the educational and occupational systems, the teaching of English in schools and in the University of Malaya, the language situation, students' career expectations and socio-cultural backgrounds.

Team members embarked on an in-depth research in this area, collecting information and data from a wide variety of sources which included available literature by local writers on relevant issues, Ministry of Education

reports/documents, University of Malaya handbooks, Faculty reports, results of surveys carried out by independent bodies such as student counsellors, etc.

Needs analysis

Investigation of the role of English in the target professions (Law, Public Administration and Business) was undertaken. The basic question that was asked was, 'What are the particular purposes for which English is used?' Initially profiles of communication needs were drawn up using a modified form of the model devised by J.L. Munby in *Communicative Syllabus Design*, (1978). This was then supplemented by a survey in which three groups of people in business, commerce and public administration were contacted.

- 1 Top professionals
2. Personnel Training Managers
- 3 Professionals with the status of departmental/divisional heads

A survey of professional uses of English in Law was also conducted through interviews with magistrates, practising lawyers and staff members of the University of Malaya Law Faculty

Structured interviews were designed using checklists and guidelines which covered, among other things, the role of English in selection, training, career development and job performance (an example of a structured interview for personnel managers is given in Appendix 1). In so far as job performance was concerned we tried to list the informant's own description of typical activities involving the use of English and complement this with a checklist devised by ourselves. These activities were arrived at by considering differences in the identity and number of participants and the medium or channel used.

Data analysis

One of the aims of UMSEP was to use an analysis of patterns of interaction and language realisation in target language use as a powerful input to syllabus design. With this in mind, in the *Oral Skills for Law* component we observed and recorded a number of magistrate's court proceedings, collected transcripts of other court proceedings, observed lawyers in chamber and interviewed magistrates and practising advocates. In the *Oral Skills for Management* component we observed a number of training courses, credit interviews conducted for training purposes, employment interviews and departmental meetings. Audio recordings were made of some of these. An observation record sheet (see Appendix 2) was also used to record and analyse as much live conversation as possible when an adequate audio recording could not be made, or as an aid to an audio recording. This covered the nature of participation and initiation-response patterns including grammatical realizations and functional categories. After initiations and responses had been noted in this way, the observer recorded details of the discourse role of the participants and who spoke to whom.

Discourse analysis

UMSEP started off with the following hypotheses on the role of discourse

analysis in the project:

1. It could specify items to be taught explicitly
2. It could specify the content of a teaching syllabus or types of teaching/learning activities
3. It could provide a checklist for a communicative syllabus

In this area of research therefore team members ploughed through a number of relevant reading assignments to investigate as fully as possible descriptions of features of spoken discourse and practical contrastive studies that are available. This was followed up with numerous group discussions and seminars on fundamental features of spoken discourse. The working papers that were produced on specific aspects that were relevant to the project's objectives, in combination with data analysis of oral interaction subsequently led to the drawing up of descriptive frameworks within which UMSEP materials were designed

Psycho-socio investigation of learners

A number of areas were selected for investigation in a questionnaire administered to third year students in the Faculties of Law, Arts and Economics. These areas were educational background, use of English, self-assessment of proficiency in English, motivation, problems encountered in English, attitudes to different teaching techniques and career expectations. The questionnaire was followed by interviews with a small sampling of students who had completed the form. This was undertaken as it was felt that the use of a large-scale scatter-gun questionnaire relying on statistical procedures which provided quantitative information, needed to be supplemented by small-scale in-depth studies providing more qualitative information. In addition, one main area was identified as being worthy of follow-up investigation: student attitudes to learning. Three further projects were subsequently set up in the area of student attitudes.

1 Student attitudes to language laboratory use

This study set out to investigate students' attitudes to specific features of proficiency and awareness of problems in speaking and listening to English. The survey made use of a questionnaire preceded by a small group discussion. Specific features of language laboratory use that were covered were: previous experience and whether expectations were met, mechanical factors (student intrinsic and equipment intrinsic), materials, intellectual challenges, feedback and monitoring isolation time, self-access and transfer

2. Student attitudes to self-access features of SRA (Science Research Associates, Inc.) Reading Laboratory

A questionnaire was given, student record sheets were examined, classes were observed and selected students were interviewed by class teachers. The questionnaire focused on student perceptions of and attitudes to control of materials, progress checks, pacing, and need for assistance. The observation

of classes concentrated on student-teacher interaction and the interviews were used to expand and elucidate questionnaire responses and evidence of record sheets and observations

3 Small-group work observation

The aims were to gather data on student attitudes to group work as well as student language use in small-group practice. Audio and video recordings were made for analysis, and observers used check-lists to note the quantity, function and sequencing of student utterances. Students observed were then interviewed by the observer

Materials and methods

As a preliminary to deciding on activity types and control parameters, existing materials were analysed in order to identify parameters and how these combined in types. This analysis was complemented with observation of classroom interactions and techniques, all of which led to the design of a classification system of teaching/learning activities. This typology in turn was to form the basis of specifications for the construction and modification of materials.

Language testing

Research in the area of language testing was concerned with the measurement and description of students' existing language proficiency and use, comparison with target performance, analysis of students' phonological, grammatical, lexical and discourse skills, errors and problem areas.

In order to collect data on students' proficiency, a standardised general proficiency test (English Proficiency Test Battery Form D 1977 constructed by Alan Davies and Charles Alderson) was given to a sample of students from the first, second and third years in all the

were to establish overall levels of general proficiency and to compare proficiency levels across years, media and faculties. Alongside the written test, an oral assessment test was conducted with a smaller sampling of students, the aims being to assess their proficiency in spoken English, to get information of student's strengths and weaknesses, and to establish correlations between scores on tests of different skills. The main interest of the exercise was, however, in trialling assessment by interview using performance as well as linguistic criteria.

Since it was obvious even in the early stages of the Project that language testing had a crucial role to play, a fairly exhaustive survey of literature was also made of task types, criteria and rating scales for oral performance.

Research findings

The next sections summarise the main findings which emerged from UMSEP research into design factors for course development and give, where appropriate, implications for course design.

Professional uses of English

From situation analysis, a categorisation of the professional fields into which

Arts, Economics and Law graduates enter was established. Based on this categorisation, key sectors in Public Administration and Business where English is crucial were identified. These include the international and commercial divisions in the civil service, the banking, manufacturing, and trading sectors and the primary industries (especially sales, marketing and international relations/operations). It therefore seemed sensible to treat various fields as having one set of common core needs, that is, to cover the use of English for general managerial purposes.

Needs for this group come under the following headings, career development (including entry to the profession), training, organizational purposes (i.e. inter-organization planning, decision-making and control), operational (i.e. performance of control duties), external relations and social encounters. Key activities identified were interviews and other person-to-person dealings, small group meetings and, for training and external relations purposes, attending presentations to large groups.

The central needs for English of graduate members of the legal profession are: reading

plaining these to counsel/witness, interviewing/counselling clients, examining and cross-examining witnesses, negotiating with another lawyer, understanding evidence and taking notes of trial proceedings in order to write up a judgment. There was clearly a need for spoken skills to be related to interpreting and writing texts.

Target students

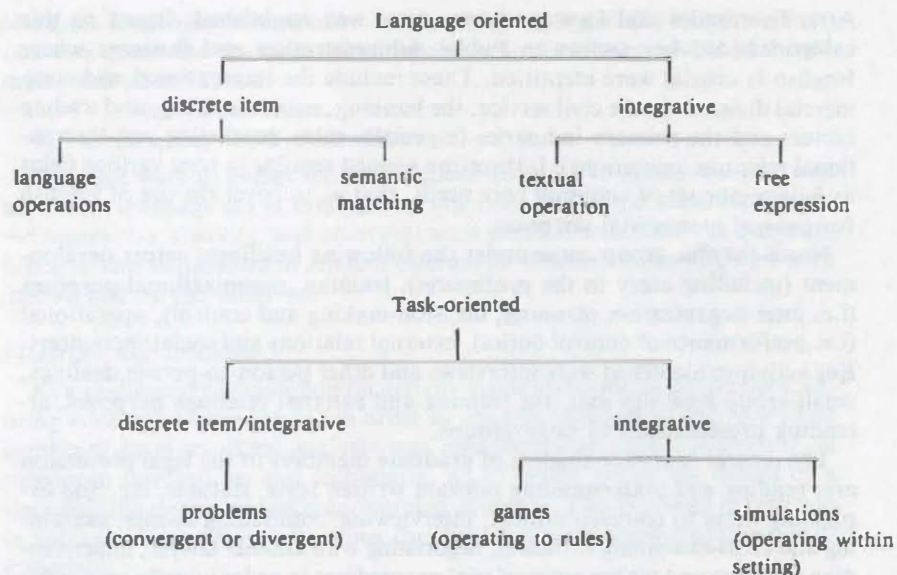
Research findings in this area indicated that our target students have an intermediate level command of English gained through following several years of general English courses. They are more proficient in reading than in speaking and have considerable, though imperfect, passive knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. There is an obvious gap between the oral skills they have and the oral skills required of them as professionals. They also lack self-confidence.

Classroom teaching techniques preferred by learners include discussions, group work, teacher-centred grammar activities, and pronunciation and vocabulary work. Generally, group work was rated highly, but there was also belief in the need for teacher supervision.

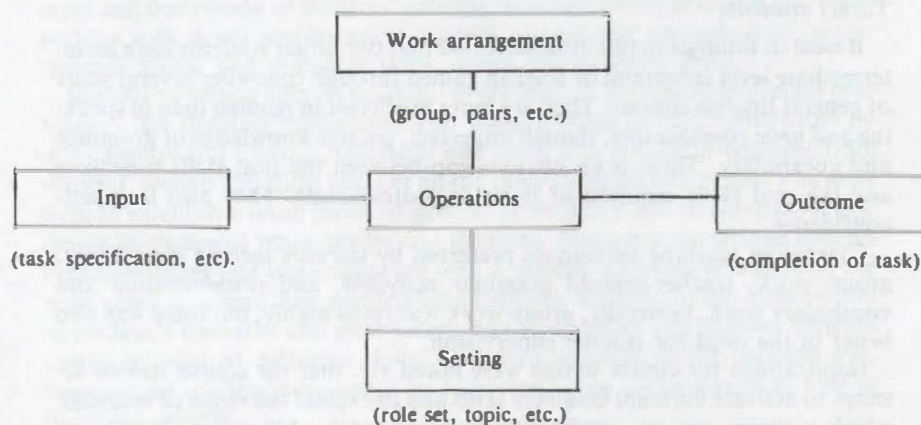
Implications for course design were noted viz. that the course should attempt to activate dormant language skills and to expand the range of language which students can use confidently and accurately. Moreover, the course should provide opportunities for the use of these language resources in performance activities which have professional relevance.

Teaching/learning materials

From the analysis of appropriate existing materials, it was found that the various types of language teaching activities could be identified as either language-oriented or task-oriented. The former involves doing something in order to solve a language problem. The latter involves using language in order to perform some other kind of task. The main types of language-oriented practice and task-oriented practice are as follows:-



It was also noted that activities can be represented as follows.



Individual parameters which were broken down included medium, channel, work arrangement, role types, types of outcome, information source, production and comprehension operations.

Indeed, when we embarked on course and materials design proper, we had a wealth of material-related research inputs such as:

- (a) a specification of communication needs which are sensitive to the situations,
- (b) a working description of target discourse types and spoken English skills,

b. Procedure:		Comments
Letters	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Forms	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Others	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2.3 Short-listing Post.	English essential	English desirable
_____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
_____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
_____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
_____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
_____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2.4. Interviews.	English	Bahasa Malaysia
a. Language	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b. Communication		
Skills. Writing reports, memos etc.		<input type="checkbox"/>
Reading skills		<input type="checkbox"/>
Effective speaking		<input type="checkbox"/>
Spoken interaction skills		<input type="checkbox"/>
Others _____		

c. Personal qualities _____		

d. Other techniques _____		
Test (specify) _____		
Simulation (specify) _____		

e Inadequate English **Comments**

Never Occasionally

Sometimes Frequently

Offered Job

Definitely not Occasionally

Probably not Frequently

Probably

Certainly

f Weaknesses

Speaking Reading

Listening Writing

Fluency Accuracy— pronunciation

— grammar

Others _____

g Communication weaknesses

Writing reports etc.

Reading skills

Effective speaking

Spoken interaction skills

Others

Part 3 Career Development

3.1 Confirmation.

	Yes	No
a. would be withheld	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b has been withheld	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
c weakness. reading/writing	<input type="checkbox"/>	

Spoken	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Fluency	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Accuracy	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Others		

3.2 Promotion/movement.

a. i. Horizontal movement

frequently	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
occasionally	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
never	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
From	_____	To

Examples. _____

ii. Different duties Yes No

Examples. _____

b Qualities for promotion _____

c Related to proficiency in English

very much	slightly	not at all
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
how assessed _____		

Comments

Specify _____

Comments

3.4. Overseas posting: (Regularly Occasionally Never)

a. i. Training

ii. English Needed

b Importance of English for selection

essential desirable irrelevant

c English language training provided Yes

(details under 3.2. c.)

No

Part 4. Checklist of activities

4.1 Which ones would recruits be involved in?

(Enter responses in Column A. Use this 3-point scale:
1 = Very often, 2 = Quite Often, 3 = Sometimes)

If necessary indicate the jobs to which this applies e.g.

- a. 1
- b. 3

4.2 Which of the activities are likely to be conducted in English? (Tick appropriate boxes in Column B).

4.3 Which of the activities are likely to be problems for recruits if English is used? For which is it most important to improve English?

(Tick appropriate boxes in Columns C and D)

No.	ACTIVITIES	A	B	C	D
		Involvement	Use of English	Problematic	Improvement
1	Dealings with customers, suppliers, agents, etc.				
2	Dealings with foreign visitors (on a casual visit)				
3	Entertaining & other social purposes (acting as host for the organisation)				
4	Attending conferences, seminars				
5	Verbally relaying information (e.g. report & interpret events)				
6	Training (give demonstration, instruct new staff)				
7	Business meetings within the organisation				
8.	Business meetings outside the organisation				
9	Doing business by telephone				
10.	Dealings with ancillary office services				
11	Making public statements (acting as organisation's spokesperson, talking to press)				
12.	Others (Please specify)				

Appendix 2

OBSERVATION RECORD FORM

1 Participation

Content: (law, banking etc.)

Type of speech event. (moot trial, interview meeting, planning meeting, reporting meeting, etc.)

:

place: _____

total time: _____

approximate time of event. _____

Identity of senior participants(s)

S1 _____ S2. _____ etc _____

Identity of intermediate participant(s)

I1 _____ I2: _____ etc _____

Identity of junior participant(s)

J1 _____ J2 _____ etc _____

1 Guidelines to answering questions

- 1 a) In law, code judges, magistrates, as senior participants (S1, etc). Code counsel, clerks, etc. as intermediate participants (I1, etc). Code witnesses, etc, as junior participants (J1, etc).
- b) In banking, business etc, in a job interview, code interviews as senior participants (S1, etc) Code interviewees as junior participants (J1, etc). In a meeting concerned with reporting and/or planning, code chairmen/managing directors as senior participants (S1, etc). Code junior executives and clerks as junior participants (J1, etc). In a meeting concerned with arranging a loan, code interviewers and interviewees as intermediate participants (I1, I2, etc).

2. Initiation — Response Patterns

- a) Your name is XYZ (Subject + Predicate)= D (declarative)
- b) Is your name XYZ? (P/S/P) = Y/N (yes/no)
- c) Your name is XYZ, is it?
(S + P + tag) = tag
Your name is XYZ, isn't it?
- d) What is your name? (Wh-- + P)
What did you say your name was? (Wh-- + P/S/P) = wh--
(wh--
Question)

e) Tell the court your name. (P) = imp (imperative)

Functional categories. initiations only

a. seeking information (general)	SIG
b. seeking information (relevant)	SIR
c. giving information (general)	GIG
d. giving information (relevant)	GIR
e. seeking supplementary information	SSI
f. giving supplementary information	GSI
g. seeking clarification	SC
h. giving clarification	GC
i. seeking opinion	SO
j. giving opinion	GO
k. organisation	O
l. comment	C
m. suasion	S
n. prompt	P
o. _____	_____
p. _____	_____
q. _____	_____
r. _____	_____
s. _____	_____

- 3 This can be coded after the meeting from the data provided by 2.
4. This can be coded after the meeting from the data provided by 2.
- 5 This can be coded after the meeting from the data provided by 2.
6. These can be coded after the meeting from the data provided by 2. a-e.