"I JUST WANNA CHAT" - ADJUSTING TEACHER ROLES TO LEARNER NEEDS AND EXPECTATIONS IN ESP

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Abstract

Speaking is a skill that is part of daily life and people do not like to feel they struggle when they need to cooperate in their speaking turns. Therefore, whenever being asked to teach a conversation class you start wondering whether the learner really sees it as pure free speaking or they may also be interested in having their course "spiced up" with grammar, vocabulary and perhaps some reading and listening. When the course is an institutional one, placed in a professional/ business context, there is already one more stakeholder. This paper is addressing some of the aspects a trainer has to tackle in order to meet both needs and expectations.

Keywords: professional English speaking skills, one-to-one, course objectives, language development, needs analysis.

1. Preliminary remarks

This paper aims to present specific features of conversation classes, happening in a 1x1 teaching setting where the main stakeholder is an institution. We enumerate some of the challenges of 1x1 teaching / learning process as experienced in our own context and also present some advice to help cope with similar contexts. As compared to teaching a group of students, the process of teaching and learning on a 1x1 course has certain characteristic features. Some of them may be perceived as advantages by the course participant (CP) and as challenges by the trainer.

A key feature of English for specific purposes (ESP) courses is the negotiation and agreement on course objectives. Unlike teaching for a group of people, teaching in a 1x1 course does not involve only negotiation with the CPs themselves but also with their employer directly or their Training Department, therefore, in this case the CP's objectives originate in different sources, but once we have the personal and professional communicative needs, we may proceed to lesson planning (Wilberg, 1987:57). However, the data collection itself is not the final stage in needs analysis. In fact, Brieger (1997) states that present needs minus present competence do not always equal course objectives.

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2. *Survey of advantages and disadvantages of teaching a one-to-one course*

For the purpose of this study on teaching a professional intensive 1x1course, we carried out a survey among teachers and a student – Ms. Eva Stancu - enrolled in an individual one-week intensive professional course at the Language Centre (LC) to find out how they felt about the above mentioned aspects. (Appendix 1 – Questionaire). Thus, we realized they all felt very strongly about this kind of teaching/ learning. On the one hand, my colleagues believed the teacher's role was being blurred among three different roles, the teacher, psychologist and friend while students felt fortunate to have opportunity for such great participation. It is a great challenge for a teacher to see one minute an adult learner talk about the way they last socialized with an Austrian client and, the next minute, complain about work problems or family life sometimes, if not each class repeatedly.

Table 1: A CASE STUDY	
CLIENT PROFILE	
Name:	Eva Stancu
Nationality:	Romanian
Age:	41
Job Title:	Manager of the Research and Development Department
Company:	MIRAJ S.A., an important cosmetics company in Romania
Previous English Courses:	2 hours per week of closed group General English classes over the last 3 years
Language level:	Mid-intermediate
Course length:	One week (4 x 90-minute sessions per day)
THE COURSE PARTICIPANT'S (CP) PRESENT WORK CONTEXT, INCLUDING RELATED AND FUTURE LANGUAGE NEEDS (as given).	
1. She has to receive and entertain visitors from abroad, and have regular telephone conversations with business contacts	
2. Ms Stancu's needs will soon increase, as she has been asked to run a series of presentations and training sessions in which the lingua franca will be English. Specialist vocabulary will not be a major problem, nor will presentation skills. This new venture is her main concern but she would also like to develop her English for participating in both formal and informal meetings, some of which she has to chair.	
3. In addition, she has to write reports on the meetings she has attended, and read reports and correspondence sent to her.	
INSTITUTIONAL REQUIREMENTS: it was both the corporate client's and the Course Participant's (CP in the present study) wish to work towards meeting these needs in a 1x1 course.	

On the basis of the insights derived from the placement test and the interview, we could delineate a SWOT- analysis of our CP, as detailed below:

Table 2: <u>SWOT Analysis for Ms. Eva Stancu</u>
<u>Strengths</u> ∗ job experienced, able to understand what she needs ∗ level B1 on the Council of Europe Scale of Levels ∗ knows specialist vocabulary ∗ owns presentation skills ∗ company sponsoring, thus highly motivated ∗ able to concentrate intensively for many hours **<u>Weaknesses</u>** ∗ lack of fluency ∗ work on confidence building ∗ still L1 influence: pronunciation and intonation problems ∗ language training to transfer skills to an English speaking context ∗ lack of linking devices ∗ lack of discourse, both written and spoken **<u>Opportunities</u>** ∗ she works in an English speaking environment ∗ runs a series of activities in which the lingua franca is English ∗ the present course that offers many chances to improve weaknesses ∗ access to excellent teaching materials **<u>Threats</u>** ∗ time constraints ∗ a too intensive course ∗ gets used to the trainer but when other audience present she may be hindered to act accordingly All this helped us identify course objectives and work towards targeted materials.

Our informal small scale survey among fellow teachers has revealed, among other things, some advantages and disadvantages as valuable and useful hints for needs analysis in further courses.

2.1.   An outline of the advantages and disadvantages of one-to-one teaching for students

Advantages

- Course participants have almost permanent attention of the teacher, so they can listen to and speak more English than they might in a group course.
- Trainees feel they are part of the learning process by bringing reference material from work, such as agendas of meetings to practice speaking, memos, etc.
- No competition from other students, their strengths and weaknesses being fully addressed.
- Pace adapted to student's needs.

- Teaching material tailored to specific level needs so that it benefits the student.

Disadvantages

- Tendency to exhaustion as they too can be in constant interaction in an unnatural way with the teacher.
- It can sometimes be difficult to measure progress since the teacher gets used to the students and tends to overlook the small scale picture.
- Not enough time to "digest" the information as students would have in a group course. They might not have the same "sink in time" as they would have in a group. *This can go against the acquisition of language, especially if teachers don't give enough restricted practise of new language and students don't absorb the language as effectively as they would if they had more time to reflect and process input in a class where the teacher might be more comfortable with silent periods.* (Scrivener, 1987)
- Monotony may be encountered if there is no change of pace and type of activity every 20 minutes we should say.

2.2. An outline of the advantages and disadvantages of one-to-one teaching for teachers

Advantages

- One level - no mixed abilities or fast finishers to deal with.
- Material can be supplied by the student according to their specific needs.
- Teachers can learn as well, students can teach them about their interests, work and experiences.
- Material selection becomes a simple task after thoroughly conducted needs analysis.
- Fewer or even no time constraints, the trainer being able to spend as long as necessary to address student's needs and personal interest.

Disadvantages

- The teacher is persistently "chatting" to the student for about ninety minutes, which might be highly unnatural, very much unlike in everyday life.
- Teachers are always expected by students to correct their mistakes; therefore, while teachers performing the different roles, they may not be able to do it without distracting the student. One-to-one training is costly and some trainers may think teaching reading and writing is inappropriate since it is time consuming and it would not be fair.
- When a teacher listens to their student's talking about their personal problems, they might feel discomfort, stress, and maybe even embarrassment at times.
- Teachers would have to refrain from expressing opposing opinions since it is not the ideas, beliefs that matter, it is the language that is being produced by the student.

This whole data we collected was of utmost importance in helping us anticipate the problems we might have faced in our 1x1 class with Ms. Stancu and also think of solutions to attenuate the drawbacks of such a challenge.

3. *How to attenuate the drawbacks of 1x1 teaching*

To avoid student's exhaustion you should try to alternate appropriately the skills you would be teaching in the seminar: warm-up speaking, homework correction/ discussion, silent reading followed by speaking based on the reading, then a small grammar slot etc.

To avoid bias, for the mid-term or/and end-course evaluation invite a colleague to conduct the speaking assessment and do the correction of the written part and, why not, to give feedback together with you.

Use authentic materials: newsletters and magazines, company videos, correspondence, memos, minutes of meetings, manuals and written instructions etc.

Familiarise yourself with your student's learning style, help them to become aware of it and allow enough time for the 'sink in' process.

Any activity that would be appropriate in a group course is a good option in individual teaching as well in order to avoid monotony: video watching, article reading, drilling, etc.

Every single teacher is being expected to do remedial work, to correct their student's inaccuracies, but in a 1x1 class you might distract the student when doing it since the physical space between you is smaller presumably. So, what you could do in this case would be to "build a wall" with your pencil case for example and make notes discreetly while looking at the student as much as possible, but be open when explaining the rationale behind your act. This could be for correction purposes or for things to address in future classes or good things they have said you want to reinforce. The student will enjoy the fact that you are paying attention to their language problems.

One-to-one training is costly and some trainers may think teaching reading and writing is inappropriate since it is time consuming and it would not be fair. However reading in particular might pay off since you get to teach skimming versus scanning, summarizing skills, implementing new vocabulary etc. In the very same way one could use watching TED Talks videos to practice listening comprehension, summarising and speaking ultimately.

Job experienced adult students with families run pretty busy lives and might not have enough time for individual study. In this case you need to ensure the right choice and amount of homework.

The goals that you have set for the course be it long term or short term, need to be shared with your student and offer feedback regularly to check if these goals have been met.

I remember having to teach an intensive four hour a day 1x1 teaching. Quite a challenge. To combat the strain of extensive, unnatural periods of concentration and interaction for both parties, go and get a coffee or have a walk for a few minutes while your student reads or does some other individual activity. They'll probably appreciate the time-out too! At the very least, change the room around and change your sitting positions from time to time.

4. The student's company wants its learners to do business English or English for Specific Purposes, but the student just wants to chat about their family. But you know they need to improve their grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. What can you do as a teacher?

This situation is a bigger problem than it might seem, despite the fact that it is the company that is paying for the lessons, it is the student who really decides if the lessons continue. The company decides whether to continue paying for English lessons or not by taking a quick look at the paperwork (e.g. the 'record of work') and then asking the students how they feel about it. Even if you have followed the company's syllabus to the letter, if the student is unhappy about this because they found it boring that may well be the end of the contract. The secret is, then, to strike a balance between the two extremes.

To try and keep everyone happy, choose a topic that combines social English or topics of general interest (e.g. functional language for travel) and business vocabulary.

Examples of topics of both general and specialist interest are: 'money' (the student's personal experience of banks as well as more general questions about the sector), 'prices' (e.g. of property in the local area), 'travel' (for business and pleasure), 'being organized', 'team building' (and socializing with workmates and clients), 'job interviews', 'e-mailing', 'tax' (and if they are paying too much), 'a good manager', 'advertising' and 'brands' (building them and buying them).

If students are resistant to doing specific grammar in class, the best way to approach these points is through correcting the errors they make when they are speaking. If you can show them a sentence they actually said with the error in it (see Table 4: Sample Remedial Worksheet) then the relevance of the point to them has at least been made. Unfortunately, the students who say they do not need to/ want to do grammar etc. are also often the most resistant to error correction. If they do speak English in their work or studies, you can make the error correction more relevant to them by choosing a sentence to correct that they would need to say in their everyday work, or by adapting the sentence they say into a more generally useful one.

The feedback session would allow the trainer to focus attention on aspects of language that were observed (rather than predicted) and proved to be strong or weak features (based on Paul Cane, BESIG Workshop in Saffron Walden).

In the literature on 1x1 courses it is considered that advantages should be taken of the fact that individual students have a particular L1 (Wilberg, 1987). One-to-one offers great potential for using knowledge both of typical L1 mistakes and, more personally, of particular mistakes that the individual student makes.

5. Specific characteristics of Romanian course participants

For the present study we assumed, however that specialist vocabulary and presentation skills are not a problem, but we have been proven wrong in our assumptions. Why? This could be due to the fact that even in the case of good professionals, the formal university training before 1990 did not offer them enough opportunities to assimilate modern concepts and relate them to practice. For most of them it is still difficult to make effective presentations even in Romanian, it is difficult to run interactive training sessions or to write well-structured reports.

The main objectives of Business English training, therefore, include techniques and the development of integrated language and professional skills.

This is why the co-operation between Trainer & CP is so important. Becoming familiar with the CP's professional situation, academic environment, cultural background and of course, language and communication needs, helped select relevant activities and adjust course objectives & procedures according to on going feedback.

On the other hand, during the speaking practice, we noticed that our CP was influenced by her mother tongue - Romanian. A mini-sample of 'spot the error' exercises, based on typical mistakes of our CP may be found in appendix 2. Correct and incorrect sentences can be mixed; typical mistakes in functional language as well as structural mistakes can be included. Romanian students generally perform very well in the language in use part of placement tests. Nevertheless they always affirm to need more and more grammar.

6. Conclusions

The current paper has provided important details on aspects that are essential in teaching one-to-one English professional classes for corporate clients. We have pointed to the fact that, in this context as well, knowing your aims *before* you plan anything, is basic methodology. More precisely, course content can be more easily determined by reflecting on the needs:

- keeping the right balance (skills vs. functional language focus, input vs. output, new language vs. recycled language)
- offering opportunity for evaluating progress and giving feedback)
- being aware of the need for flexibility

To conclude, this study aimed to show the multiple functions of any teaching / learning process taking place in institutions involved in education. If these processes are carried out according to professionalism and co-operation principles, they become enriching experience for individuals, and last but not least, for the whole team

Appendix 1: **QUESTIONNAIRE**

Task 1
What factors do you need to take into account when teaching a post experience business English learner in a one-to-one situation?

Task 2

(a) How would you obtain the information you require to prepare the course outline?

(b) List **5** problems you are likely to encounter in teaching this client.

(c) How would you deal with these problems effectively?

Sample Answer

(a)
There are a variety of ways to obtain information to prepare the course outline for this particular client. It would be good to initially send an e-mail requesting preliminary information from which a needs analysis can be drawn up which can then be discussed. A menu of business English skills could be drawn up which the client can prioritise his/her needs from. It would be preferable wherever possible to have a face-to-face interview to talk through client needs. Alternatively, this could be done via telephone. It will be important for the trainer to emphasise the necessity of setting clear aims and objectives together.
Another way of getting information might be to liaise with the client's PA to obtain information about business situations where the client needs to use English. Company literature and materials could also be requested so that client needs are better understood.

(b) There may be a number of problems the trainer might encounter when teaching this client. The client may not be able to keep to regular dates and times of classes due to work commitments. There may also be frequent interruptions of class for the same reason. It is likely that the client may want to improve his/her spoken skills very rapidly and have high expectations which means that there is a risk of lack of motivation if objectives are not reached at the perceived desired speed. Additionally the client may be unable or unwilling to do homework or self-study outside of class. Progress can be hindered if the client is away for long periods of time.

(c) There are a number of ways of dealing with such problems effectively and these are listed below:

- Flexibility in location – the venue need not always be the same. Perhaps it might be possible for the trainer to meet the client elsewhere if the client is unable to be in the office
- Negotiate times with client – i.e. block booking rather than 1 hour classes might be easier and more accessible

- Negotiate clear and realistic course goals and objectives with client ensuring s/he is fully aware of these. Make sure these goals and objectives are reviewed on a regular basis
- Ensure that "homework" is relevant and of interest to the client – perhaps link it to a real business task the client has to carry out i.e. a presentation or a phone call
- Tangible achievements to mark progress will keep motivation going

Appendix 2: Course Syllabus for Ms. Eva Stancu				
Monday	**Tuesday**	**Wednesday**	**Thursday**	**Friday**
• Presenting Course Needs Analysis, Negotiation & Feedback on it • Introducing BE dictionaries and recommending how to use them	**Telephoning to Exchange Information** *Topic*: checking & correcting, explanations, enquiries etc. *Language*: correcting wrong inf., paraphrasing, indirect question forms etc.	*Business Communication Skills* **Presentations** Sum up Key Features of Effective Presentations *Video*:' Effective Presentations' Feedback	*Business Communication Skills* **Training Sessions** Similarities between Presentations and Training sessions (audience) How to run interactive training sessions How to set objectives	*Business Communication Skills* **Meetings** *Video*:' Effective Meetings' Feedback *Role playing*
Coffee break				
Business Communication Skills **Socialising** *Topic*: polite phrases, showing interest etc. *Language*: requests, offers, thanks, etc.	*Business Communication Skills* **Telephoning** *Video*:' Effective Telephoning' Feedback *Role playing*	*Business Communication Skills* **Presentations** • **Fill in a Mid-Course Evaluation** Reference to visual aids Preparing tomorrow's minipresentation	*Business Communication Skills* **Meetings** *Topic*: checking understanding, expressing opinions, hypothesizing. *Language*: checking & summarizing, conditionals etc.	**Role-playing Training Sessions** **BE Trainer ⌋ Cosmetics Trainee** **BE Trainee ⌋ Trainer** Feedback
Coffee break				
Business Communication Skills **Socialising** *Topic*: socializing, cultural differences etc. *Language*: invitations and apologies etc.	*Business Communication Skills* **Presentations** *Topic*: company structure, talks, making recommendations etc. *Language*: structuring presentations, using *recommend, suggest, advise* etc.	**Summaries, notes, reports** Basic skills and techniques Notetaking, summarizing etc.	*Business Communication Skills* **Meetings** Formal vs. informal mtngs One-to-one vs. larger group mtngs Participating vs. chairing	**A Special Project** **A simulation revising many of the skills and situations in the course**

Lunch break				
Business Communication Skills **Telephoning to Make Arrangements** *Topic*: polite questions, starting and finish calls, making appointments, changing arrangements etc. *Language*: telephone language, *would* etc.	*Business Communication Skills* **Socialising** *Video*: 'Effective Socializing', Feedback *Role playing*	**Correspondence** Writing letters and faxes	**Presentation Simulation** Feedback **Reports writing** **Focus on homework correction** Developing writing skills through reading Transforming minutes into reports	• Placement Test Correction & Feedback • End-of-course Evaluation

Appendix 3: Sample Remedial Worksheet	
Language focus	
Language to be corrected	**Possible correct version**
1. advertisement 2. how old have you 3. a man which continues	1. warning 2. how old are you 3. a man who continues
Explanations:	

1. **'**Advertisement' is a false friend. In Romanian, a word with identical spelling means warning. So the CPs use it thinking it means warning.
2. Because the same expression in Romanian would use to have instead of 'to be'.
3. In Romanian we use the same relative pronoun for each case.

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