A case study demonstrating the development of a short workplace English course in Hong Kong
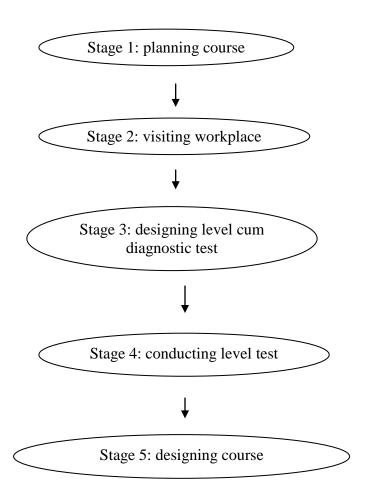
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Abstract

This paper demonstrates how a lexical approach can be combined with a corpus-based approach to develop a short course for English for Specific purposes (ESP). Applying a life story model, it recounts how an English language curriculum for a specific target language community was developed. Language research through concordancing was conducted to deconstruct a small 2000 word text to find the most common language patterns and collocations specific to the lexical field in question and to draw up the language syllabus. In addition, through an initial needs analysis with participants, a list of communicative functions was drawn up and situational dialogues created to facilitate these functions. Although the course itself was not taught, a final post-course design reflection is offered to complete the research cycle.

1. Introduction

McAdams (2004) puts forward the notion of the `life story model` of identity, or narrative theory. This notion posits that lives are organized as self stories or living theories. In other words, a person reconstructs his past and anticipates his future in terms of a subjective, evolving life story. Thus, identity is constructed with settings, plots, themes and characters. The most prominent scenes and the meanings taken from these can be selected and used to construct an individual's identity. The 'life story model' is also important for action research. Similarly to the story protagonist, the researcher seeks to solve problems through focused action to improve his circumstance. There is a series of events, and a final event is recounted to end the story. In this paper, this final event is the tendering of a course outline. A coda or post-story reflection is also offered. It is in the form of the post-course design reflection. The story itself recounts the steps taken to develop an English course for specific purposes starting from the planning stage; moving on to meeting and level testing participants, through to designing a functional and lexical syllabus. The course itself has not yet been taught. Therefore, a post-course analysis is not offered. However, this is not important as this life story is concerned with the process of creating a course, not implementing it. The setting for this research is a jewellery company in Hong Kong. It required the design of a short 8-hour oral course for its front line staff. The company wished to focus on its frontline staff's skills at dealing with customers. The Human Resources Department requested that these staff undergo an initial level test and then, from the 60 tested, that 20 would be selected with a good enough level to go on to do the course. There was therefore a need to form a homogeneous learner group rather than a heterogeneous one. As pointed out by the Human Resources Department, too much diversity (differing language levels, educational levels and work experience) could not substantially be catered for.

The important events in the course design process are given below in figure 1:

2. Course design process

Stage 1: planning course

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Stage 2: visiting workplace

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Stage 3: designing level cum diagnostic test

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Stage 4: conducting level test

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Stage 5: designing course

3. Conceptual underpinnings in course design

3.1. English for Specific Purposes (ESP)

Dudley Evans and St. John (1998) define ESP as a field in language design and delivery with certain characteristics. It is learner and learning oriented because it seeks to meet the needs of a specific learner and is centered on language, discourse skills and genres related to a particular field. In this way, it also exploits a methodology which reflects the field's main usage. As Hutchinson and Waters (1987: 19) state:

> 'ESP is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method is based on the learner's reason for learning'.

Carver (1983) makes a distinction between genres of ESP. These are English as a Restricted Language; and English for Academic and Occupational Purposes. English for Academic and Occupational Purposes involves language courses for relatively broad groups such as English for Business and Economics (EBE) and English for Medical Studies (EMS). This is in contrast to English for Specific Topics, which has a much more narrow focus. Examples of this genre might be the language required by air traffic controllers. For this paper, the ESP genre is primarily English for a Restricted Language. As Mackay and Mountford (1978: 4-5) outline below, this kind of language is clearly delineated by its context:

> 'The language of international air-traffic control could be regarded as 'special', in the sense that the repertoire required by the controller is strictly limited and can be accurately determined situationally, as might be the linguistic needs of a dining-room waiter or air-hostess.'

However, the ESP course for this paper also includes some more general English as participants also require language for what was termed 'engaging in smalltalk with customers'. Thus there was a need for both content language acquisition plus general language acquisition. Finally, an important component of an ESP course of this type is the use of authentic materials. These should be designed to train participants to better their capabilities for purpose-related tasks required of the target setting. For example, English for business courses might require students to design and present a business plan for a new product.

3.2. The lexical approach

A lexical approach (Lewis, 1993; Nattinger and DeCarrico, 1992; Thornbury, 2004; Sinclair, 1991; Willis, 1990) was primarily applied for the course and materials design. In other words, the content objectives of the course focused on the grammar of a word's collocations (e.g., light sleeper; a broken home) and the importance of whole chunks or lexical phrases (e.g., *it's not my fault*), which can be learned and used for communicative purposes. These chunks have also been referred to as 'gambits' (Keller, 1979); 'holophrases'(Peters, 1983); 'lexicalized stems' (Pawley & Syder, 1983); 'sentence frames' or 'institutional utterances' (Lewis, 1993); and 'pre-fabricated lexical phrases' (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992). These whole chunks or lexical phrases are often comprised of words which are very common in the general English language corpus such as 'be'; of'; 'and'; 'to'; and as Sinclair (1991; 72) notes

> 'Learners would do well to learn the common words of the language very thoroughly, because they carry the main patterns of the language'.

It is argued that, in first language acquisition, collocations and lexical phrases are learned as whole strings or single units. After this, they are then said to be broken down and stored as smaller units and made available for syntactic rules. The understanding of and ability to construct language by generalizing and using syntactic rules is more attuned to the Chomskyan notion of linguistic competence as an innate ability to use a

'transformational grammar' model (Chomsky, 1957) or 'creative construction process' (Krashen and Scarcella, 1978). The crux of this theory can be summed up in Humboldt's words *'make infinite use of finite means'* (cited in Chomsky, 1965: 8). To represent this notion, Chomsky (1965) used the following clause: *'colorless green ideas sleep furiously'*. It is grammatically sound but meaningless. The construction of this clause demonstrates how the speaker can generate language creatively by combining components of noun and verb phrases. Each segment can be replaced by another. This knowledge of the language provides the basis for the actual use of language by the speaker/ hearer.

In contrast, as Nattinger & DeCarrico (1992: 114) state:

> 'Lexical phrases… allow for expressions that learners are yet unable to construct creatively, simply because they are stored and retrieved as whole chunks, a fact that should ease frustration and, at the same time, promote motivation and fluency.'

By learning whole units, children can immediately communicate effectively in a particular context without a great deal of processing. In effect, it is believed that a dual system is developed: one which consists of item and system learning. As White (2001: 83) acknowledges: -

> 'If, in fact, learners do operate two different but complimentary and interactive systems – memory and syntactic – in tandem, there would be some justification for maintaining two different strands in a language system, one of which would be broadly functional/ communicative, the other analytical, with content from memory feeding into the syntactic system for analysis.'

In addition, this language focus would also enable participants to use their first language, Chinese, to aid memorization. As Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992: 67) state:

> 'As in English, the Chinese poly words are completely fixed'.

Lewis, 1993) posits that the learning of these units can be facilitated by the OHE (observe-hypothesize-experiment) process. Through roughly-tuned input (Krashen, 1985), a language learner is able to consciously notice and work with these strings, constructing a memory bank of grammaticalized lexis. These strings therefore need a context in which to be used and this provides an excellent basis for situational English through situational dialogue and what Wilkins (1976) describes as the utilization of 'categories of communicative function' such as requests, offers and complaints. In other words, the retrieval of and experimentation with lexical phrases should be facilitated in a particular social context for a particular interactional purpose. This meant that role-play would be an essential component of the course design.

3.3. Corpora and concordancing

To construct the lexical syllabus, a corpus was used. A corpus (McEnery & Wilson, 2001) can be defined as a body of text that is representative of a particular variety of language, which is stored on a computer. With 'data-driven learning' (Johns, 1991), the data are primary and the teacher has a new role as a coordinator of research. In particular, concordancing programmes for computerized text analysis can be used very productively in the ESP classroom. A *concordance* is "a collection of the occurrences of a word-form, each in its textual environment" (Sinclair, 1991: 32). McEnery and Wilson (2001: 121) identify ESP as a particular domain-specific area of language teaching and learning, where

> 'corpora can be used to provide many kinds of domain-specific material for language learning, including quantitative accounts of vocabulary and usage which address the specific needs of students in a particular domain more directly than those taken from more general language corpora'.

There exist today, large *monitor* corpora, or open-ended collections of texts such as the British National Corpus (http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/). These are general English language corpora with over 100 million words from a variety of language sources. Diverse corpora have also been constructed for particular professional domains. The largest current professional corpus is the Corpus of Professional English. It is being compiled by the Professional English Research Consortium (PERC), Japan, and Lancaster University, UK. It comprises 100-million-words of English used by professionals in science, engineering, technology and other fields. There are also smaller corpora constructed to represent areas of language catering for the specific needs of a particular group. In this way, a course syllabus can be tailored-made which facilitates faster and easier access to relevant language data. An example of a smaller corpora created for language learners is Roe's Corpus of Scientific English comprising 280,000 running words, also known as *tokens*, (cited in Yang, 1986).

4. Course design

4.1. Planning the course

Due to time limitations, I decided that it would be advantageous if the level test could work on different levels. Firstly, if its' content reflected the genre of language and skills that the course itself would incorporate, this would also act as a diagnostic test to find out about some of the needs these learners had. As Bachman (1990: 60) posits

> 'Information from language tests can be used for diagnosing students'
> areas of strength and weakness in order to determine appropriate
> types and levels of teaching and learning activities. When we speak of
> a diagnostic test, we are generally referring to a test that has been
> designed and developed specifically to provide detailed information
> about the specific content domains that are covered in a given

> programme or that are part of a general theory of language proficiency. Thus diagnostic tests may be either theory or syllabus-based.'

I could, in this way, assess 'objective needs'. Brindley (1996: 13) defines objective needs as:

> 'derivable from different kinds of factual information about learners, their use of language in real –life communication situations as well as their current language proficiency and language difficulties'.

During the test I could gain insights into participants' abilities to perform in key situations and from there, appropriately decide on the level of the course's input to ensure effective intake for all participants and design relevant engaging learning activities.
I felt that as this was such a short course, it was extremely important to ensure that input and activities were set at the right level so that diverse learning needs could be catered for. I wished to provide learners with learning input, I + 1, (Krashen, 1985) to ensure that a sense of achievement (Van Lier, 1996) was established. Additionally, as this would undoubtedly be a fairly mixed level class, I needed to ensure that group work was an important component of the course to enable peers to help those with less English to cater for the differing zones of proximal development (Vigotsky, 1986). Thus there would need to be activities that provided opportunity for scaffolding (Bruner, 1963) to take place in the classroom.

Secondly, during the diagnostic test, I could ask participants about the content, skills and learning activities they felt less confident with and would like to see incorporated in the course. This would mean that the level test could also act, as an informal 'subjective needs assessment' (Graves, 1996). As Graves (ibid: 13) states, this form of assessment seeks to investigate:

> 'the cognitive and affective needs of the learner in the learning situation, derivable from information about affective and cognitive factors such as personality, confidence, attitudes, learners' wants and expectations with regard to the learning of English and their individual cognitive style and learning strategies'.

This was considered very important as demands laid out by the Human Resources Department on its staff to follow this course outside working hours meant that motivation was principally extrinsic.

In addition, asking participants to have an active say in the content at the outset might spark feelings of a sense of course ownership and aid in the development of participant autonomy and ultimately the growth of intrinsic motivation. As Van Lier (1996: 13) writes:

'The autonomous learner must be able to make significant decisions about what is to be learned'.

I therefore wished to incorporate as much of a learner-centred approach to the course design as possible. In this way, the model emulated was a 'process –oriented' syllabus. White (2001: 100) writes of the 'process syllabus': -

'At the beginning of a course, teachers would review their knowledge of the students – their characteristics, their previous language learning experience, their past results and future needs. The students' perception of their needs would be elicited by questionnaire and discussion as would their preferences for content, skills and learning activities'.

However, I was also very aware that the Human Resources Department was expecting me to produce a course outline based on the briefing I had had from them. I could not significantly divert too much from the original course proposal tender which had been submitted prior to meeting the staff. As Uvin (1996: 56) notes: -

'Funders tend not to commit themselves to a programme or course unless the extent of need has been clearly demonstrated and documented, this may jeopardize the implementation of a more dynamic and more participatory approach to course design'.

4.2.   Visiting the workplace

I visited the main branch of the jewellery company in Hong Kong and was given a tour of the building by one of the personnel from the Human Resources Department who showed me the product range on offer and outlined the types of services provided by front-line staff. I also had the opportunity to meet and interview some of the staff and to ask them about their main duties and concerns about using English in their workplace. The majority of the staff explained that they dealt with English speakers from a variety of countries but not native English speaking countries. Their interlocutors were more likely to be Japanese, Singaporean, Taiwanese and Malaysian. The kind of English that they were exposed to on a daily basis, using Kachru's (1996) 'three circle model', was from the 'Outer' (Singapore) and 'Expanding' Circles (Malaysia, Taiwan, Japan). The 'outer circle' denotes a country where English has become part of the country's institutions (e.g., Parliament, The Press and the medium for education) and has gained a second language role. In contrast, the 'expanding circle', according to Crystal (1997: 53):

'Involves those nations which recognise the importance of English as an international language, though they do not have a history of colonization by members of the 'inner circle' (USA, UK, Ireland, Canada, Australia and New Zealand)…In these areas, English is taught as a foreign language'.

This initial information reinforced the premise that the requirement for a native-like pronunciation model was totally inappropriate for this course; the focus would be more suitable if based on developing reasonable intelligibility (Jenkins, 2000; Kenworthy, 1987; Kirkpatrick, 2009) with a greater concern for communicative competence (Hymes 1972; Littlewood, 1981) rather than a standard model pronunciation. Further, the degree to which the course would concentrate on grammatical accuracy was also limited, as stakeholders would not be exposed to a native-like Standard English from customers buying in the store. A more appropriate language learning focus would be salient formulaic, multi-word lexical units. With only an 8 –hour course to design, language activities based on common lexical phrases found in this kind of environment would be more beneficial both in terms of learner needs and achievement. Participants could be asked to use relevant chunks of language in concrete, authentic situations

The outcome of the needs analysis from meeting the participants for the first time was the awareness that the majority of the time this target discourse community (TDC) used English in the following ways:

- To describe and compare products. There was a need to focus on the pronunciation of jewellery - collection names as well as some technical words describing gems and precious metals.
- To be better able at listening to and understanding requests from customers.
- To make suggestions and give advice to customers who wished to buy or exchange a product.
- To engage in small talk with customers.

Using this data, course objectives were established and a level test created. A proposal for the test was sent the following week and was accepted. It would consist of three main parts and these parts would reflect the fundamental elements of the course that I wished to develop based on the data that I had already collected from the briefing and the interviews.

4.3.   Constructing the level cum diagnostic test

The following content for the level test cum diagnostic were constructed using the data collected. It would be divided into three sections to effectively emulate the needs of the staff. Human Resources wished that each test was recorded. Participants were not aware of this aspect as it was believed that this knowledge could have a negative backwash effect. In addition, the opening of the test was intended to relax the participants and allow this researcher to get to know each person. It was deemed that relaxing participants at the outset was essential because, during any test, affect is very prominent. As Horwitz et al (1986:128) point out:

> 'Any performance in the L2 is likely to challenge an individual's self-concept as a competent communicator and lead to reticence, self-consciousness, fear, or even panic'.

Tsui (1996: 156) continues:

> 'When communicating in a language in which they are not fluent, learners cannot help but feel that they are not fully representing their personality and their intelligence'.

Affect is a significant element of any spoken English test. Striving to reduce it should be prominent in the test constructor's objectives.

Part 1: Introductory conversation

A very basic structure for this part of the test was chosen. It would start with a welcome and an introduction from the tester then move onto a self-introduction from the participant, followed by the answering of a sequence of questions such as: *Which branch do you work at? How long have you worked for the company? Could you tell me about your main job duties? Do many foreign visitors come to your shop? Do you speak English to them? What do you find difficult when you speak English to customers?* This section would also indicate learners' skills for 'small talk', a major course objective.

Part 2: Customer Service Situations

Participants would be given 'what do you say when…?' questions to elicit important functional language for given situations. This would test their knowledge of pre-fabricated lexical phrases. A set of typical questions for each participant would be:

What do you say when … ?

- a customer enters the shop and is looking around?

- a customer wishes to exchange a ring that she bought earlier in the day?

- a young man is looking for a gift for his partner but he doesn't know what to buy?

Participants could answer using one or more suitable expressions for this situation. The tester then asked follow-up questions such as 'does this type of situation arise often?'By asking questions about the situations, it was hoped that participants would become more aware that this researcher was interested in their work and through this empathy, encourage further dialogue, which would be the objective of the next level of the test.

Part 3: Situational dialogue

The third aspect of the test was intended to be more open-ended, with a larger focus on interaction in appropriate given workplace situations. Learners would be asked to participate in an authentic, common situational interchange concerning a product or other such customer enquiry. They would have to give advice and to describe products put

before them from the store. A series of situations could be selected from for this. These included the following:

- Situation 1: a customer asks about wedding rings. Give some help and advice.
- Situation 2: a customer asks about necklaces for his girlfriend. Give some help and advice.
- Situation 3: A customer asks about earrings for herself. Give some help and advice.
- Situation 4: A customer asks about table-top ornaments for her grandfather as a birthday gift. Give some help and advice.
- Situation 5: A customer asks about lucky charms for her daughter's birthday. Give some help and advice.

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4.4.   Conducting the level cum diagnostic test

It was decided with the Human Resources Department that the bulk of the course content would be based on participants' performances in the areas highlighted by the test. Twenty participants would be selected from sixty. I would also create band descriptors and criteria for the evaluation. Before conducting each test, I explained why we were doing the three stages. I told these participants that the content of the test reflected the kind of content that they would see on the course and that this test had been produced with the objective of using the data to design material for the course itself. I asked these participants to add any further ideas of their own for the course at the end of each test conducted.

5.   Designing the course

After the tests, I could assemble some important factors about participants:

- Ages ranged from 18 to 50
- There was a balance of male and female staff
- The majority had not studied English since leaving school (a particularly long time for those aged over 30). None had done any high-level studies, leaving school after their HKCE certificates – the Hong Kong equivalent to the GCSE. However, they did use English quite regularly at work and sometimes on holiday.
- They had very similar job duties – some explained that they occasionally had to use the telephone for customer enquiries about jewellery but that in general most dealings with customers was done face to face in the stores.
- The majority agreed that the situations chosen in the test were highly representative of their daily work. However, a majority had great difficulty in part 3 of the test, describing the products. They expressed the essential need to be better at this, to have a wider range of vocabulary. They also described the difficulties that they had in pronouncing these very specific and often technical terms.

I could also now develop the contents of the course using the following:

- Common errors and difficulties from the recordings
- The answers to the needs assessments from interviews
- The website of the company (the Human Resources Department had told me that I would find the kind of specialized lexis that front –line staff had to use there. In fact, it was pointed out that many clients, before going to the store, would visit the web site first to have a clearer picture of what was on offer. The website could therefore be considered as a corpus available from which I could select the appropriate lexis for product descriptions.

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5.1.   Creating the functional language syllabus for dealing with customers

The functional language that I would make explicit during the course would be influenced to a great extent by the work of Nattinger and DeCarrico. In their chapter 'Functional aspects of lexical phrases' (1992: 59) they group lexical phrases according to the functions they perform. The categories are similar to Wilkin's and as noted by Nattinger and DeCarrico (ibid) devised for use as practical instruments for the classroom and adhering closely to current work in discourse analysis and speech act theory. (Ibid) Topics to be covered were: -

- *Social Interaction*
- Promising action, giving advice, responding to summons, nominating a topic, clarifying, checking comprehension, closing and parting.

Examples for 'giving advice' might be:

If I were you, I'd + verb (without to)
I (don't) think you should…
You could always…
You might be interested in …instead (of)…

- *Conversational Purpose*
- Being polite, questioning, answering, requesting, offering, complementing, asserting, accepting and expressing gratitude

Examples for 'questioning' might be:

Could you tell me…?
Would you mind telling me?

To provide appropriate input in these areas, I asked a very experienced member of the jewellery company, whose workplace English was excellent, and who was not taking the course I was writing, to help me to record dialogues based on four common store situations: -

- A dialogue (approximately 30 seconds) with a client who is asking about methods of payment;
- A dialogue (approximately 2 minutes) with a customer who is looking for some jewellery as a present for his daughter;
- A dialogue (approximately 2 minutes) with a customer who wishes to exchange a ring because his wife did not like the gem;
- A dialogue (approximately 2 minutes) with a knowledgeable customer who is looking for a very specific type of jewellery in the store. The customer keeps asking lots of questions related to colour, type of finish and so on.

The dialogues we were to create for the course would be as authentic as possible. We would have a list of keywords and set phrases that we could choose from to do this, but we would not read out the text from a ready-made dialogue. In addition, to make the development of this role-play material more realistic, items of jewellery from the shop for the situations to be acted out were provided.

5.2. Creating the lexical syllabus for describing products

As noted above, the company's website provided the corpus for the lexical syllabus. I wished to create as representative a corpus as possible for this field. To do this there were three important stages: -

5.2.1. Stage 1

The first step was to input the main text 'Know your Jewellery' from the web site into a word frequency indexer. Wordsmith Tools (http://www.liv.ac.uk/~ms2928/wordsmit.htm) was used for this task. With the results, a list of 2000 words (including both functional and content words) was compiled with which a corpus for the course could be constructed. The most common words of the corpus (and; of; in; are; to; with) were then inputted into Word Smith Tools concordance programme so that the most common language patterns in the corpus could be isolated. I subsequently used them to make concordance lines and I hoped that I would be able to compose a very representative selection of the target corpus from this data. From the concordance lines of these 6 words I was able to observe that the patterns from the high frequency words could be used to construct a lexical lexico-grammatical syllabus for the jewellery company. The following is a brief account of the patterns that came up:

AND could be exploited to teach common asyndetic constructions such as adjective + adjective and noun phrase + noun phrase. It would be ideal for teaching suitable descriptive language for jewellery and precious stones.

- 'valuable and rare'

- 'length and 'depth'.

OF would be particularly useful for nominal constructions.

- The pattern of NP + of + NP permeated the corpus, for example 'the reflection of light on the pearl's surface'.

In addition, the following patterns with *OF* were also common:

- Determiner + of + determiner + NP e.g., 'all of these diamonds have been cut to perfection' was common:

- NP + of + ing: 'There are many ways of cutting diamonds'

- Adjective + of + NP: 'comprised of larger facets'

- Verb + of + NP or –ing: 'Have you ever *dreamt of owning* a rare pearl?'

IN would be useful for teaching the verbs, nouns and adjectives that it followed in the corpus:

- Verb + in + NP: - 'cut in different shapes'

- NP + in + NP: - 'variations in any or all diamonds'

- Adjective + in + NP: 'large in size'

Is/ ARE, as a copular verb, would be useful for looking at frequent passive constructions in this field as well as commonly used adjectives.

- NP + *are* + Past Participle (+ by) + NP: -'diamonds are graded by colour'; 'most pearl jewellery is made from Tahitian pearls'.

- NP + *are* + NP/ adjective/ preposition/ adverb: - 'They are often round or near round in shape'.

An example of how I could use *OF* for nominal constructions is presented below. These word partnerships are used to describe diamonds. Participants are required to match the noun or adjective on the left with its appropriate nominal construction and then compare with a partner. Sometimes more than one answer may be possible.

Distribution of		the birthmarks
Reflection		cutting
Size and position	OF	larger facets
Path		light that travels

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Comprised		inclusions
Many ways		light

After this 'observation' stage, participants are required to 'hypothesize' about and use or 'experiment' with the language.

- Can you explain to your partner what some of these phrases refer to? For example, 'Distribution of inclusions' refers to a diamond.
- Can you substitute any words on the left with another word? (For example, 'path' could be replaced by 'ray').

Having done that genre of analysis, a focus on phonological accuracy could then be facilitated. The activity above be exploited in the following ways, again with a further opportunity for hypothesis forming leading to experimentation:

- In connected speech, how do we pronounce '*OF*' when it is found between two noun phrases?
- Which consonant sounds complete each word on the left?
- When you say these words you should try to link the consonant sound and schwa sound.
- In pairs, practice saying the whole noun phrase linking the final consonant sound of the words on the left with the schwa in medial position.
- Can you think of any other phrases with this pattern NP + of + NP to describe gems or precious metals?
- Write them down. Compare with another group.
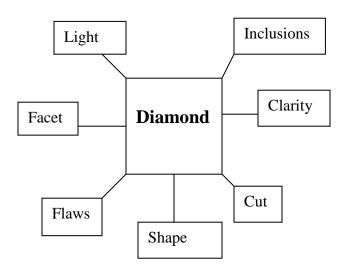
5.2.2. Step 2

The next step, using the word list from the indexer, was to note the uncommon, content words from the corpus. This would comprise the specific English used to describe the topic to be learned. It was observed from the list of infrequent words, that the most common nouns were types of gem and types of precious metal. These became the superordinates for the lexical fields. The following lexis appeared several times in the corpus:

- *Gems and precious metals*
  Gold, diamonds, emeralds, pearls, jade, platinum, aquamarine, quartz, red garnet, blue topaz, amethyst, sapphire, crystal, enamel

Having isolated this lexis, I then used Wordsmith concordancer to see which words, in the corpus, were commonly associated with these items. Some of these semantically-related items were the following:

- Diamond: cut, clarity, shape, light, brilliance, flaws, inclusions, facet, pear-shaped;
- Gold: pure, alloy, carat, white;
- Emerald: angle, size and shape, cut;
- Pearl: Tahitian, South sea, Akoya, freshwater, black, oysters, spherical;
- Jade: treated, colourless, dyed, quality, fine- carved.

The following is a lexical set designed as a mind map that could be used for learning.

```
         Light                    Inclusions

                                        Clarity
Facet         Diamond
                                    Cut

    Flaws
              Shape
```

It was anticipated that earners would be able to construct their own mind maps during class from lists of lexical items. The pronunciation of the more difficult words could be dealt with at this stage while learners were working with the lexis to construct their mind maps.
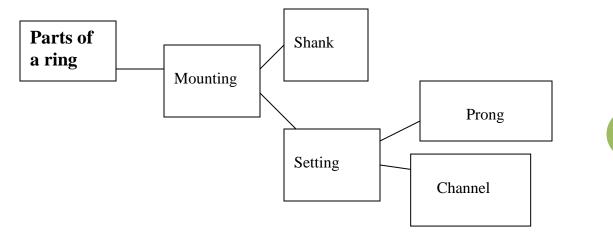
5.2.3. Stage 3

The next step was to look at the types of jewellery available at the store. To do this, I had to go to another part of the web site. I found that the following types of jewellery were the most common: bracelets, necklaces, earrings, pendants, studs, rings and bands.

For this particular aspect of the course I thought it would be appropriate to ask sales staff about the most popular items in the store and to use them in class by making flashcards, from the web site pictures on a projector or bringing in regalia. That way we could create activities such as 'Kim's Game', incorporating useful adjectives and adjective ordering exercises. In addition, participants would need to be able to describe the parts of jewellery types. There was no significant descriptive data on the web site so I consulted a book that could aid in building lexis in this area. As with 'diamond', brainstorming and mind mapping was considered an effective way of looking at this unless learners could develop their own methods of storing lexis.

An example of the specialized lexis used for rings is given below:

6. Assembling the Course Outline (see appendix 1)

Having examined all the data, noted the common words and patterns from the web site, listened to a variety of participants (weaker and stronger) on the recordings and thought about how best to go about presenting the language, I decided to compile a general course outline presenting the objectives and content of the course as well as a more detailed outline for each session. I would send this to the Human Resources Department to be considered. If accepted, I would present this to participants to find out if they found the course suitable or if they had any other ideas for reducing or extending it. This pre-course feedback would be essential and any preferred changes could be made. In this way, the learner-centred approach to the course design positing a 'process –oriented' view to syllabus design was catered for.

7. Post-course construction reflection

One of the four objectives of an action research of this sort is expounded by

> 'to develop and improve practice through research in the interests of all those concerned'. (Altrichter, Posch and Somekh, 2000: 74)

Having examined all the data, noted the common words and patterns from the web site, listened to and spoken to a variety of participants on the recordings and thought about how best to present the language, I felt that the course had been well researched and was based on learners' needs and wishes as well as demands from the funders. I had been lucky enough to meet and question a great many of the stakeholders in the initial stages and felt that I had incorporated a balance of their requirements. These requirements were both perceived by participants (their answers to the questions: how I use English everyday and this is what I find difficult) as well as more or less unperceived (the

language that they produced spontaneously during the level tests). In this way, I believed that there had been a learner and learning-centred approach to the course design. Learner-centred because each participant's language weaknesses in the chosen areas were examined and would be used to build the content of the course; learning-centred because the way participants needed to use English was the focus of the course' s learning and teaching activities. A final intention for the course was that it would continue to be process-oriented in that, if participants made requests for components to be edited, deleted or added, this would be done without hesitation.

A means of assessment would also have to be incorporated into the course. The most logical way of doing this would be to give learners the same kind of tasks that were given during the preliminary level cum diagnostic test and to compare participants' performances before and after the course using the same criteria. With this information, I would be able to give a written evaluation of each participant's progress based on the same band descriptors. This would help to validate the course content and the entire course management process. Evidently, learners would not be aware of the fact that they would be asked to carry out the same genre of tasks as the pre-course testing for the post-course testing.

8. Conclusion

At the beginning of this paper, the life story model was described and its link with action research argued. The events leading up to the course outline product have been explored. The course itself has not been delivered but that is not the focus of this paper. The focus is the process of ESP course design and how a tailor-made course can be constructed from start to end. It is hoped that any ESP teacher or course material designer can find useful insights in this paper which lead her/ him on a similar process of discovery through cycles of planning, implementation and reflection.

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Appendix

Course outline

Lesson (2 hours each)	Lesson plans
1	- Getting to know you; - Talking about your company and job; - Know your jewellery (ways of describing 1); - Roleplay and functional language for being polite (1): offers, suggestions, expressing politeness; modals & indirect forms; - Evaluation of lesson.
2	- Recycle role- plays; - Know your jewellery (ways of describing 2); - Adjective order and comparatives using flashcards of items; - Listening 1 - customer enquiries; - Roleplay + functional language: enquiring, replying, giving advice, complementing; - Evaluation of lesson.
3	- Dealing with methods of payment and explaining discount opportunities; - Listening 2 – handling complaints;

	- Roleplay and functional language for being polite (2): complying, expressing concern, giving advice; - Know your jewellery (ways of describing 3); - Evaluation of lesson
4	- Describing the area around Hong Kong; - Listening 3 Sightseeing in HK; - Roleplay and functional language for giving directions; - Roleplay and functional language for small talk with customers. - Evaluation of lesson; - Course revision; - Evaluation of course

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