Rationale for Hairstyling ESP Unit Development

Rosalie Hirch

I. Introduction

When well-planned and guided by research, an ESP course can have a significant impact on a learner’s language knowledge about a topic (Chostelidou, 2011). This paper explains the theories and methods used to develop a unit of learning materials for an ESP course for hairstyling, an area that has not been explored much in ESP, given the preference for high-profile occupations such as medicine, business, and law (Belcher, 2006). Hairstyling is, however, a high-stakes field in that it directly affects personal appearance, and a bad hairstyle is often something than cannot be easily ignored or fixed. Despite this unique aspect of hairstyling, there is a risk that hair salons would be seen as falling within the general category of “English for Business” and not get specific attention. Due to the emphasis on business, many ESP texts emphasize reading and writing, which is less applicable to salons as hairstyling relies heavily on listening and speaking with a client to negotiate meaning that is then turned into action. Therefore, a course on hairstyling will tend to emphasise procedure over category or description (Dovey, 2006); a hairstylist uses language to understand what to do in a concrete situation, and course materials must reflect that. In other ESP, and also general ESL, situations a textbook writer can rely on a repertoire to guide content decisions, whether it is appropriate to do so or not (Tomlinson, 2012). In hairstyling, no such repertoire exists—ESL texts referring to hair salons are almost always from the perspective of the client, and do not focus on the hairstylist’s communicational goals, which are substantially different from those of the customer.

The unit being described in this paper is entitled Unit 3: Greeting a Returning Client. The ideal, imagined learner would be someone who is either currently enrolled in a technical (beauty)
school, or is about to begin, and already has general language skills, possibly from a prior general ESL course. The unit topic was chosen for several reasons. First, clientele in a salon differ fundamentally from customers in other service and sales industries because hair salon clients are coming back to see a particular person; people do not typically return to a restaurant because of a server nor to a clothing store because of a salesperson. In this sense, the stylist is actually the product, and the total experience—including but not limited to the hairdo—is the manifestation; greeting a customer is a part of that experience, and marked differences between what occurs in an initial and a return visit should be predictable. Second, unit 1 in the proposed syllabus begins with greeting a client for the first time, while unit 2 is doing the initial consultation (including strategies for discussing what the client wants). Unit 3 includes both of these aspects, and is therefore cumulative as well as being an extension building on what has been learned so far. Finally, and most importantly, there is the notional aspect of what the hairstylist must accomplish; since the stylist is the product, one of their primary objectives in interactions with a client is to keep that person’s business. Part of what must be taught to learners, therefore, is language strategies for achieving that objective, beginning from when the customer first walks into the door; what is expected of the stylist to accomplish this goal must be an acquired language skill that involves social and cultural knowledge. Therefore, a notional-functional syllabus is appropriate, teaching not only tasks but also pragmatic skills for accomplishing short-term (completing the hairstyle to the client’s satisfaction) and long-term (ensuring return business) objectives (based in part on Wilkins, 1978 notional categories).

II. Modes of Materials Presentation

According to Dudley-Evans & St. John (1998), learning materials can have several functions: they are sources of learning; they offer learning support; they provide students with motivation
and stimulation; and they serve as a reference tool. Traditionally, textbooks have been the central source for most of these functions, with supplementary materials—often provided by the teacher—filling in any gaps (Harwood, 2005). The design for this unit breaks somewhat from the heavy reliance on textbooks in that it has both a textbook and a website that are interdependent; for example, the textbook recommends a class discussion on cultural aspects of materials that are on the website. There are numerous advantages to this integrative design. On the side of the textbook, students are accustomed to having a book in class and may be more comfortable with it, whereas they may not be familiar with using computers in the classroom. Using Mohan (1986)’s Knowledge Framework to describe the role of textbooks, they would likely be particularly recognizable to learners as sources for descriptions, classifications, principles, and sequences, which is how it was primarily used in this design. The textbook is more overt in stating objectives and skills for the unit than the website is, and makes clear the sequence that learners should use in a conversation. The textbook tends to order information: for example, though the haircuts and colors are described in readings on the website, they are presented in the textbook in the form of a chart, which emphasizes the classification of the colors, as opposed to definition. This gives an alternative visual aspect to aid students in understanding the vocabulary.

The website, however, serves numerous practical purposes that the textbook is less effective with, beginning with cost-effectiveness; it is less expensive to put color photos (essential for a hairstyling course) on a website than in a textbook. The teacher can use aspects of the web pages as an overhead projection in class, and they will tie in directly to the textbook. Students also have some autonomy to set their own pace with the web pages, but the instructor can simultaneously monitor some of their progress through seeing if they are completing additional assignments that
are included in all practice activities (results are automatically emailed to the instructor). Instructors can use the scores for grading, or for diagnostic purposes.

Another advantage of combining the two is that it highlights the differences between meaning-making in the classroom and in the place of business (Knobel & Lankshear, 2014). Students may expect to use a textbook in the classroom, but outside the classroom they will utilize much different forms of communication. Having the multimodal activities on the website can assist them with transitioning into real-world use of the skills they will use, especially since the skills tend to be combined more on the web pages, giving the activities an authenticity that somewhat replicates real-world application. And finally, given the importance of multimodality in the modern world, it is important to expose students to as many genuine forms of communication as possible; this cannot be done with traditional textbooks alone, but requires other venues of learning (Tomlinson, 2012).

III. Materials Developed

Though the unit development process was based on the concept of a notional-functional syllabus, it necessarily utilizes some task-based items such as described in Lambert (2011); for example, the section on filling in and reading a client card is a practical task that takes place before and after interactions with a client, and requires both listening and writing. Most of the tasks in the unit, however, were more content-based, and focused on how to make language use meaningful (Belcher, 2006). One particular issue for this project is the fact that most ESP materials tend to be text-centered and focus on reading and writing over speaking and listening (Plastina, 2013; Belcher, 2006). Obviously, for this course, there had to be a much greater emphasis on listening and speaking, and particularly in initiating and carrying on conversations by asking appropriate questions, listening for responses, and translating that interaction into
agreed-upon action. Therefore, materials had to be designed in such a way that they allowed for as many listening and speaking-related tasks as possible.

Another issue is authenticity; this means not only creating materials that replicate the skills needed, but that also reflect the needs and goals of the discourse community, in this case, salon workers (Spence & Liu, 2013; Abdi, Rizi, Tavakoli, 2010). The materials should also authentically represent the work context (Belcher 2006). This was partially reflected in the design of the web pages, beginning with the introduction, which is intended to look like a genuine salon page with a video montage and music—many salons now market aggressively online, so it is appropriate to give students some of that experience. Ideally, there would be a homepage with a menu similar to that of a salon site, but that was not achievable for this project.

The language experience for learners should also be placed within context, and be comprehensible (Tomlinson, 2012). An example from the unit is the article that was included on the web pages; it is actually fairly generic and not entirely legitimate in that “This Year’s Hottest Styles” is something that changes from year to year, and is therefore outdated as soon as it is written, let alone much later when the class is finally taught. However, the article is written to compensate for this by highlighting hairstyles that have had longevity, and because it is authentic to the genre; every year there will be many articles comparable in type, mentioning similar people and styles, and therefore stylists should become accustomed to looking for them.

Similarly, the review activity attempts to imitate a real encounter in a non-high stakes way, through a choose-your-own-adventure format. Students make choices that have some consequences, and though there are preferred actions to take, the activity is designed in such a way that there are multiple routes to arrive at a satisfactory conclusion, and that one can make a dispreferred choice and still attain the goal. This initially seems to contradict the textbook, which
proffers a seemingly correct sequence of inquiry with clients. However, in making multiple paths available, the task subtly implies that, though there is an optimal method, there are alternative ways to achieve a goal. This could implicitly help relieve the student of the burden of thinking there is an absolute answer, as well as providing an opportunity for the instructor to engage with students on the topic.

Multimodality was a substantial factor in the development process. The unit materials were designed in such a way as to offer students various modes of learning, which will hopefully enhance their language processing abilities (Plastina, 2013; Tomlinson, 2012). For hairstyling, which is focused on visual aspects, speaking, and talking, this meant including numerous photographs as well as audio and video recordings. Multimodality further facilitated creating several opportunities for learners that would in some way imitate real-life situations (Egbert, Hanson-Smith, Chao, 2007). In particular, the article on hairstyles, the video review activity that is filmed from the perspective of the hairstylist, and the client card replicate simplified work conditions. Another important element is creating an optimal learning environment for students; not all students learn in the same way, but tend to exhibit variation between individuals and even within one person, depending on the content and context (Hampel, 2006; Ma & Kelly, 2006). Thus, wherever possible, there was a combination of pictures, sound, and text in the materials.

Pictures played a particularly important role in the design, since they can work well to enhance comprehension of a text (Royce, 2002; Mohan, 1986). This is a key element for hairstyling, which is very visual. Images have a graphic message which Royce (2002) divides into four elements that can enhance text comprehension: identification; activity; circumstance; and attributes. In this unit, pictures were used in a variety of ways that correspond to these categories. Throughout, they are used alongside text to define specific topics and words; on the
other hand, vocabulary in the textbook is rearranged to form a different type of image—a table—to aid comprehension (identification). Pictures appear incidentally in both the text and on the website to give atmosphere (circumstance), and can also be used by an instructor to initiate discussion (activity). In the case of the hair colors page, the activity is a matching game that draws attention to the names of hair colors by requiring students to match pictures of colors with appropriate names for them. Superficially, the task has the disadvantage of implying that there are absolute names for colors, when in real life this is not the case (a web platform was sought that might allow variations in matches or multiple correct answers, but none was found); however, the task does emphasize the fact that there are subtle differences in colors that learners need to familiarize themselves with and be prepared to explain, which is also a classroom activity in the text (attribute). Finally, one point is mentioned within the textbook that the instructor would likely need to highlight—hairstylists should make use of pictures whenever possible in their work in order to ensure that they are giving clients the correct service. Liberal use of pictures throughout the materials subtly reinforces this idea.

Computers are useful for improving reading through elements such as linking documents or looking up words (Cobb, 2007). It is also important to make the readings salient, meaningful, and frequently encountered (Tomlinson, 2012). As was mentioned above, the article is intended to be an imitation of an authentic text students might run into for their work; at the same time, questions were added that, though not authentic work-related tasks, would be useful to check for comprehension and to make certain points more salient. However, since listening is important, wherever possible speaking was added; learners have the option of listening to a recording of each section of the article, and the client card activity and quiz have listening elements as well. Similarly, using closed captioning with videos has been shown to have a positive impact on
learners’ acquisition of vocabulary, likely because the cognitive load is eased (Winke, Gass, Sydorenko, 2010; Rosa, Parent, Eskenazi, 2010). The review activity in the materials was designed with the intention that the videos would be capable of closed captioning—due to technical problems that has still to be worked out, but when it is available, having text should assist learners with the activity.

Another element used to assist with vocabulary on the web pages was in the use of glosses in the article. Several studies have found that explicit vocabulary instruction, particularly through computer-mediated glosses, are helpful for learners by easing their cognitive load (Ma & Kelly, 2006; Abraham, 2008; Gettys, Imhoff, Kauz, 2001). Glosses have proven most helpful for intermediate-level learners and higher; they are generally less effective for beginners (Li, 2010; Abraham, 2008). Since the learners for this ESP program are assumed to already be at approximately an intermediate level (they would likely have taken a general course already, and be taking this course alongside their technical training), glossing would be highly appropriate.

Words that were chosen for hairdressing fall into two distinct types for definition; one is technical words related to the process of hairstyling (dye, ash brown, pixie cut, etc.), for which glosses on the web pages are mainly suited, since these words are often most easily described through pictures of the items and processes. The other is related more to pragmatic aspects of speech, termed here “affective elements”, and includes general terms of appearance (flattering, frame the face) as well as sociocultural aspects of language (stylists should not say “We will bleach your hair” but should choose culturally preferable terms such as “We will lighten your hair”). The textbook may be more appropriate for these elements, as they would likely require metatext and discussion more conducive to a textbook format, though online glossing could be used in conjunction. Previous literature does give a distinct preference for using L1 for glosses
(Tian & Macaro, 2012; Hall & Cook, 2012; Gettys, Imhoff, Kauz, 2001); however, this is mainly suitable for homogenous L1 classrooms as in EFL situations. Another assumption made about the learners who would take this course is that they would come from a wide variety of first languages, and it would therefore be difficult if not impossible to give an L1 equivalent for words. Instead, the glosses were designed to be less like dictionary definitions, giving simple explanations instead that would be readily accessible for and applicable to stylists.

IV. Student Engagement

Another important aspect that was taken into consideration was how to give students some independence, and also how to encourage them to offer feedback that might influence the future direction of the course. There is substantial evidence that engaging students in the process of learning influences their success in acquiring a language (Hampel, 2006; Tomlinson, 2012; Benesch, 1999). Therefore, a section was included at the end of the web pages entitled “Self-Assessment”. This section utilizes two different ways of asking students about the unit they have just taken. The first is a direct question, simply asking what students learned and what they would like to learn more about, which will be an expository style familiar to learners. In keeping with the multimodal aspects of the design, a narrative-style frame was also included, which has been effective for some learners (Macalister, 2012). Inviting learners to engage in a different mode of writing may help some who are not comfortable with openly sharing their thoughts and feelings, and could therefore yield vital information. It might also be useful as a bridge to yet another type of computer-based interaction—social media—which was not included in this design but could easily be integrated, and would likely prove useful for learning and to build networks for future career success. One final area that encourages student autonomy is in the final classroom activity given in the textbook chapter, which asks students to discuss cultural
aspects of hairstyling. Students can feel free to give their own opinions, which may not only enhance their understanding of the materials, but improve their experiences within the technical classes that they would be taking (Benesch, 1999).

V. Assessment

Assessment was not covered as extensively in the unit design as the other aspects of learning were, mainly because assessment in this context is something that would likely have to take place in conjunction with the technical school, to emphasize the interaction between language training and the workplace (Dovey 2006). It might therefore be best to coordinate cumulative assessments with the beauty school’s activities. Quizzes were included at the end of the unit, which are fairly simple, low-stakes, and, with the exception of the client card quiz, not particularly authentic to the workplace—they would most likely be useful for diagnostic purposes, and also in case the instructor needs to give grades. One thing that should be mentioned, which could be quite useful, is the potential for a task like the review activity to be used in assessment. If it were possible to follow a student’s progression through the activity, it might reveal information about their thought processes, and could be quantifiable, perhaps by judging the types and number of steps the learner took to achieve a satisfactory end. This has not been tried and therefore would require more research, but could at least be worth looking into.

VI. Conclusion

A thoroughly researched English course for hairstylists has never been designed before, so this one has to be done completely from the ground up. Based on prior research into syllabus and materials design, this unit attempted to employ aspects of a notional-functional syllabus in content and multimodal task design. Such a combination should enhance learners’ experiences and ultimately provide them with the tools to succeed in language acquisition.
References


