Developing an ESP Course for Hairstylists

I. Introduction

There are numerous arguments made against offering English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses, ranging from problems with methodology to the language elements of such classes being accessible within the context of a content-based course of study (see for example Jasso-Aguilar (1999) for a summary of arguments against ESP courses). Many of these arguments are based on the assumption that ESP courses largely focus on occupational vocabulary. The compelling reasons for creating ESP courses, however, go well beyond vocabulary differences. One has to do with the issue of potential gaps between language skills that are taught in general English as a Second Language (ESL) courses and actual workplace use, and whether general ESL classes offer sufficient language training, or if a learner gap still exists. Ultimately, this is a problem of generalizability versus specificity; arguments against teaching ESP assume universal language patterns and pragmatic skills that may not reflect specific, contextual language situations (Hyland, 2002; Belcher, 2006). Another related issue is that of membership within a discourse community. People tend to identify themselves not so much by a common general language (English speakers, Chinese speakers), but by a specific identity group—doctor, plumber, hairstylist—and will likely adapt language for use within that group; this is not restricted to vocabulary, but to patterns of speech and behavior as well, which may have to be taught explicitly, rather than assuming they can be acquired implicitly in a content-based classroom (Abdi et al., 2010; Long, 2005).

Furthermore, there is an issue of cognitive load—learners need to understand many different aspects of their future employment situations that will lead to ultimate success in job placement (Lambert, 2010). Unlike native English speakers (NES), non-native English speakers
(NNES) have the additional burden of mastering target language; such difficulties could affect success in the program. Thus, an ESP course could ease some of that cognitive load and provide an environment for education and career success (Cowling, 2007; Hyland, 2002; Lambert, 2010). In line with this observation, trade instructors, though a valuable resource for language needs research, may be unable to understand the issues for NNES learners in the classroom; instructors understand the work, but are generally unaware of the language specific to their field, and may even make false observations regarding it (Hyland, 2002; Long, 2005). Finally, it could be difficult for trade instructors to understand cultural issues that learners may be facing. This includes not only the fact that many NNES could be facing an unfamiliar setting, but even within that, there may be issues such as different education background/style or gender to take into consideration (Belcher, 2006; Benesch, 1999). Having a classroom setting where all of these issues could be addressed would likely be conducive to creating an environment for ultimate success.

A. ESP for Hairstylists

The next question is: Why hairstylists? The simplest answer is that hair salons represent an interesting gap in ESP literature that could be worth exploring for a variety of reasons. While there is quite a bit of research done in ESP, this tends to be in “high profile”—with high earning potential—fields such as doctors, lawyers, and business (Belcher, 2006). Research tends to focus less frequently on job areas that will probably offer lower pay, and being a hairstylist would likely fall into this category; as will be discussed below, though, this may not only be an unfair classification, but could also conceal issues of social inequity. Furthermore, hairdressing and beauty work is unique among other sales and service industries. It is high-stakes in the sense that an error could result in serious and immediate consequences; delivering an incorrect product or
bringing the wrong dinner order can be easily corrected and forgotten, but an error in haircut or color cannot, and has a direct, immediately observable, and daily impact on the customer. And workers such as salespeople and servers have very different long-term goals than do hairstylists, since the former only need to treat customers well to ensure return business to the store or restaurant, while hairdressers want customers to return to them specifically. If a salesperson or waiting staff changes jobs, customers do not follow them because they are loyal to the business, but clients will often change salons to follow a hairstylist. Aside from these reasons, hairdressers require specific and intensive training that is rarely required by other businesses in sales or service industries. It would therefore be unfair to generalize hairstylists within another, broad field such as “Business English”, since hair salon culture likely has its own, unique way of viewing and interpreting the business world (Hyland, 2002).

On the other end, a possible need for ESP courses for hairstylists may exist based on evidence drawn from a variety of colleges and institutes that offer hairstyling courses marketed for NNES. Several programs advertised online offered general English studies, followed by courses in hairstyling. The implication is that the students will learn the appropriate occupation-specific language skills while learning the trade; as has already been discussed above, this may be problematic. Only one program claimed to offer language skills that were in conjunction with a similar program of study, in this case, ESL for Estheticians, but closer inspection showed that the English content was grammar-based, and had almost nothing to do with career language training beyond occupation vocabulary. In both cases, the ESL content is not specific to the field of work, and there is an underlying assumption that a certain level of general language knowledge is adequate for learners to gain entrance to the target discourse domain. This has not been adequately demonstrated, and largely ignores issues related to student success after
graduation. As a simple example for hairstyling, most vocabulary lists include names of haircuts and dyes, which likely could be acquired in a trade classroom; on the other hand, they neglect an interaction such as which cut or color would be best for the client. That kind of exchange may include complex negotiations between what the patron wants, what the expert feels would look good, and what can be done given the client’s hair. The interests of all stakeholders should be addressed to ascertain whether or not there is a genuine need for ESP courses in hairstyling (Dehnad et al., 2010; Long, 2005).

A subtle but important aspect of a needs analysis for hairstyling ESP is sociocultural. Of course, there is a consciousness of the role of English in the modern world (Belcher, 2006); outside of English-speaking countries, there would likely be little need for a hairstylist to speak English, so the likely target group would almost certainly be people emigrating to English-speaking countries. Learner needs must therefore be evaluated not only as a language issue, but also as a cultural one, adapting to the norms of a different society (Holliday, 1995). Focusing on immigrants brings up specific social issues, particularly interactions in the workplace, not only with customers but also with fellow practitioners and salon owners, all of whom have their own specific and sometimes unequal statuses (Hyland, 2002; Belcher, 2006). Beyond these highly localized contexts, however, there are broader implications both within and for society. Immigration to many English-speaking countries is widely encouraged in order to develop diversity in high-end jobs (Bosher, Smalkowski, 2002), but along with this comes a need for greater diversity in other fields as well, which might result in a greater interest in hiring visible minorities in areas such as hairstyling, and a greater need for NNES hairstylists who can communicate in their native languages as well as in English, transitioning between two different
Significantly, there may be a connection between the type of school that markets to NNES and their potential for future success. A quick survey of hairstyling schools suggested they can generally be divided into three bands: at the lowest level are community colleges and schools not affiliated with salons and styling products, which tend to produce practitioners at a basic level of competence who would likely require more training to get high-paying jobs; in the middle are schools with a local or regional reputation for producing very good or excellent practitioners; at the top are prestigious institutes, with national and international reputations for excellence and often tied to famous salons or hair product lines, and whose graduates have a higher probability of getting placed in high-end jobs. In this sense, the school that a student attends could have a significant influence on whether they are giving $20 or $200 haircuts later on. An initial observation is that it seems the low-end schools tend to market to immigrants explicitly, through affiliated ESL courses offered elsewhere in the school; mid-level schools mention that they have a language requirement such as a minimum test score but have little or no further targeted marketing; high-end institutes list no language requirement on their web pages. Much more information is needed, but if this is an accurate representation, there could be strong implications for students; in order for a NNES to excel in the field of hairdressing, a high level of language proficiency may be necessary. Far from ESP courses being a barrier to improvement (an argument summarized in Jasso-Aguilar (1999)), this could represent an industry issue, where

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1 Interviews and other data will help to fill this in more, but already I have “anecdotal” evidence that NNES hairdressers may be valuable employees in salons. First, I spoke with a Canadian hairdresser who mentioned an influx of Africans to the community, and how he does not know how to style African hair; it is literally foreign to him. Also, my own experience in Korea is that I preferred English-speaking hairdressers, and would literally go out of my way to find them. I talked with a Muslim student about this issue, and she too said she would prefer to have her hair cut by a Muslim. Further evidence is needed, but it is likely that ability is, in fact, not the highest priority for customers.
some students are excluded based on lack of language proficiency (Benesch, 1999; Belcher, 2006), and ESP courses could offer access to advancement.

B. Triangulation

In order to explore all of these different issues in language and culture of hairstyling, this study will adopt a triangulation method for data collection. Triangulation is collecting data from multiple, non-overlapping sources for comparison purposes (Long, 2005; Jasso-Aguilar, 1999). An example of non-overlapping data would be questionnaires completed by practitioners about their jobs and job descriptions from a company manual. Different forms of data that could be collected include: interviews (Long, 2005; Lambert, 2010; Spence & Liu, 2013; Jasso-Aguilar, 1999; Cowling, 2007; Macalister, 2012; Bosher, Smalkowski, 2002); surveys (Long, 2005; Spence & Liu, 2013; Jasso-Aguilar, 1999; Cowling, 2007; Macalister, 2012); questionnaires to stakeholders (Long, 2005; Cowling, 2007; Macalister, 2012; Bosher, Smalkowski, 2002); recording actual language use (Long, 2005; Jasso-Aguilar, 1999; Cowling, 2007; Macalister, 2012); non-participant observations at work (Long, 2005; Spence & Liu, 2013; Jasso-Aguilar, 1999; Bosher, Smalkowski, 2002) and at school (Cowling, 2007; Bosher, Smalkowski, 2002; Benesch, 1999); review of existing records and materials (Long, 2005; Lambert, 2010; Jasso-Aguilar, 1999); journals (Long, 2005; Cowling, 2007); testing (Long, 2005; Cowling, 2007); and quantitative research designs (Long, 2005). Collecting such a wide variety of data improves authenticity, since it explores not only texts, but areas where those texts interact with each other and with the context (Belcher, 2006; Jasso-Aguilar, 1999). It also serves a validation function, since confirmatory information for one text may come from another (Jasso-Aguilar, 1999; Spence & Liu, 2013). On the other hand, where there are discrepancies, richer insights into the discourse situation may be observed (Long, 2005; Benesch, 1999; Jasso-Aguilar, 1999); the
difference between an objective observation of a situation and a participant’s subjective interpretation could yield insight into the underlying social interactions.

Beyond collecting the data, however, there is a need for analyzing it in a meaningful way, which is not always simple nor straightforward. Most studies have a tendency to focus on the different types of data; so for example, (Dehnad et al. (2010) discusses dividing data according to subjective and objective needs, or those forms of data that are coming from within a discourse community and those obtained from without. Such distinctions are not always clear—many documents, for example articles, may be insider and outsider at the same time. Others focus on company expectations, job description, and language analysis, which largely exclude learners from the equation (Jasso-Aguilar, 1999); or they focus on the learners’ needs and expectations and authentic texts, overlooking numerous other factors (Macalister, 2012; Dehnad et al., 2010). All of these equally suffer from poorly defined targets for analysis. Even where methods are made more explicit, as in the Venn-like diagram in Figure 1 below (taken from Spence & Liu

![Figure 1: Triangulation design, from Spence & Liu (2013)](image)

(2013)), there is a certain vagueness as it is unclear what the overlapping areas in the diagram actually mean. What information is intended in the overlapping areas? Do these imply methods of analysis? The diagram is in fact misleading, since it looks more scientific than it actually is; there is no clear relationship within the overlapping areas.
II. Study Design

A. Participants

The model developed for analysing data in this study is loosely based on that in Spence & Liu (2013), but instead of triangulating according to methods of data collection, it triangulates relationships among the various stakeholders and uses that information to target data collection to gathering information about specific areas. Five stakeholders were identified for hairdressing: learners, being the NNES who wish to study hairstyling; practitioners, defined here as people who are already working in the field; salon owners; trade schools, meaning the places where students transition from being learners to practitioners; and customers. It is important to note that ESL instructors and institutions are not included, the reason being that there are currently no ESP courses specifically designed for hairstylists as yet, and it seemed unlikely that much pertinent information could be gathered from that direction, as the relationship with the other areas is not clear. A visual representation of how these stakeholders might interact is given in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Diagram showing the five stakeholders identified for the current study, and potential types of interaction among them.
The first areas for analysis are intrapersonal, meaning information that can be collected about each stakeholder; these are the areas that do not overlap, and therefore represent fields of inquiry specific to individuals. Information can be gathered about learners’ wants, linguistic backgrounds, and sociocultural situations; from practitioners, information about target language use as well as sociocultural aspects; from salon owners, expectations; from customers, needs and wants; and from trade schools, demographic information.

Looking at the intersecting areas suggests the different types of interpersonal relationships that exist. Since the picture is complex, it is helpful to remove the learners and trade school, shown in Figure 3. This diagram suggests authentic work conditions. The first

**Figure 3:** Diagram showing the three stakeholders that would represent language use in an authentic work context for this study.

intersection is salon owner and practitioner; there are many different issues within this relationship, from general workplace politics, to the specifics of working environment—for example, whether hairstylists are viewed as employees, or whether, if they rent chairs (as is the

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2 This was an area largely overlooked in Benesch, 1999; that study focused on sociocultural issues between NNES students and their content-course instructor, but did not factor in the NES students and how they felt about the classroom situation. Were the interventions perceived as beneficial for the NES students as well? Or were there any feelings of resentment? Such sociocultural elements may be important to later success of students.
situation in many salons), greater parity exists in the relationship. It is also important to note that, unlike many other working situations where the “boss” is a separate, largely administrative position, salon owners are usually practitioners and therefore spend much of the day on the floor, interacting directly with other hairstylists and clients. The next overlap to consider is practitioner and customer, which is where much of the target language of the work comes into play.

Customers and salon owners have interactions both as practitioner/customer and also as a salon owner markets to customers and attempts to both maintain current clientele and attract new patrons. Where all three intersect could indicate several different forms of interpersonal skills, from customer satisfaction, to selling a variety of services not initially requested by clients, to problem solving and customer dissatisfaction. When learners and the classroom are placed back in the picture (Figure 2, above), the overlapping areas are issues related to the learner potentially experiencing a gap, and whether or not the trade classroom can fill in that gap. Though there are some areas where non-language-specific training may be adequate, there could be many others where it is not. All areas also suggest different types of sociocultural contact and needs, from personal opinions to complex and unequal social interactions.

One final point that needs to be made is that, for this study, the focus is primarily on hair salons that target women, rather than men’s salons (also known as barbershops). There are several reasons for this. First of all, women’s and men’s hairstyling practices are clearly very different; even at trade schools, they are often offered as two separate courses, “hairstyling” and “barbering”. The design is already fairly complex, and adding another dimension would likely make it unwieldy. Furthermore, the types of learners being targeted in each is probably divided along gender lines, and therefore the sociocultural issues would differ markedly; again, since
these are complex matters, it seems better to focus on one group, and save comparisons between the two for later studies.

**B. Data Collection**

In keeping with the methodology of triangulation, a wide range of data collection methods are proposed, as well as indicating which areas of Figures 2 and 3 they would likely be able to address.

i. **Workplace Recording**

Workplace recordings, or recordings made in actual salon settings, will give authentic interaction data. This would cover many of the overlapping areas shown in Figure 3, and would target questions about those particular fields, especially regarding tasks, vocabulary, and language patterns. Since hairstyling is almost entirely about verbal interactions, and since oral data in all discourse fields is not as well studied as textual (Bowles, 2006; Jasso-Aguilar, 1999), this is a key component of the study.

ii. **Surveys**

Surveys would be given to all stakeholders. In general, these would cover broad topics of inquiry, and would be used systematically to focus later questionnaires and interviews (Lambert, 2010; Spence & Liu, 2013; Macalister, 2012). The exception is with customers, who would only be given surveys and no additional follow-up (though they would naturally be a part of the recordings). Intrapersonal areas, including wants and expectations, will be a focus, but also sociocultural attitudes, and perceptions of roles and relationships.

iii. **Questionnaires**

Questionnaires would be given to all stakeholders except customers. These would use information from surveys to target more specific information in a variety of areas.
iv. Interviews

Interviews can give more detailed information than either surveys or questionnaires can, but have the disadvantage that they are time-consuming, can be done with far fewer people than surveys or questionnaires can, and are often difficult to arrange. Interviews would therefore come relatively late in the entire study, and would target highly specific areas, based on results obtained from the surveys and questionnaires. These would likely focus on learners, practitioners, and trade classrooms, but possibly also salon owners.

v. Textual Data

Though hairstyling is primarily verbal, texts can provide important triangulation data. Three different forms of textual data would likely be relevant for hairstyling. The first is texts related to the job, particularly job descriptions and job advertisements, but possibly also trade magazines. The second is data related to schools and the types of students enrolled, especially about job placements (where graduates tend to be employed), and social statistics. Within this category may also be quantitative data about the number of immigrants pursuing careers in hairstyling, and their success rates after graduation and beyond (e.g. whether they move on to their own salons, or ultimately decide to change careers). Such data offers details about the effectiveness of trade courses in filling language gaps. The third is external texts for comparison purposes—this includes corpora related to general business practices, and business and service English courses, which can be compared to the audio recordings to potentially identify key terms and language patterns specific to hairstyling.

vi. Observations

Two types of observations are mentioned in previous studies and are relevant here. One is classroom observation, which would entail seeing how NNES perform in the classroom, and the
other is workplace observation, examining interactions at the workplace. Both will likely yield information on how successful trade classrooms are at filling language learners’ gaps. This can also give information that can be used later in interviews to better understand the intentions and motivations behind interactions.

vii. Assessments

These can be general test scores (TOEFL, IELTS, etc) as well as exams targeting hairstylists’ language, and will also help to understand whether general language skills are sufficient for success, or whether language gaps exist that still prevent ultimate success.
References


