Do the Cornelsen ESP Matters series textbooks meet the needs of ESP in Asia?

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Abstract

Cornelsen's Matters series consists of seventeen textbooks focusing on different content areas, from Trade, Business and Technical Matters, to Dentistry, Shopping and Legal Matters. The aim of this paper is to examine whether these textbooks meet Asian ESP needs. These needs include building functional, technical, and relational vocabulary; understanding key information and gist while listening to speakers with different accents; answering questions, clarifying and structuring both written and spoken responses; building flexibility, by using appropriate direct and indirect language, as well as developing assertive behavior. The pedagogical activities in the textbooks will be compared and contrasted with these needs.

Key words: ESP needs, pedagogical methods, evaluating materials, pragmatic flexibility

I. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to evaluate whether the Cornelsen Matters (ESP) series textbooks meet ESP needs in Asia. It is an ambitious task to identify the ESP needs in Asia. This suggests that there are one common set of needs which can be identified for the variety of national, organizational and job specific cultures. English for Specific Purposes, calls for needs based analysis of local contexts to identify key characteristics and patterns of interaction which can be learned from and then appropriate learning materials can be tailored to match those needs. The extent to which these needs can be understood and matched with personalized training materials depends on the ability and time of the local researchers and also how well these training materials can be designed, implemented and evaluated. Gaps emerge in this model when needs analysis cannot be conducted fully, or there are too many variables. Similarly, there is not enough time to produce specific materials for every training context. Therefore, compromises are made. This article will firstly describe landmark ESP studies from specific contexts around Asia. Then common needs will be drawn. Secondly, the teaching methodology of the Cornelsen textbooks will be described. Finally, there will be a critical discussion revealing whether the textbooks meet these needs.

To define the gap between research and pedagogy, Chan (2009) described a holistic framework for evaluating business English materials. This involves reviewing relevant research, organizing findings, developing checklists, evaluating materials, identifying gaps and then dealing with the gaps. This model provides a framework for evaluating materials. The following tables are based on Chan's (2009) checklists. The first is a checklist for pedagogical considerations, and the second addresses discourse.

Table I

Checklist for evaluating teaching material pedagogy

Needs Analysis
Does the material suit the target learners' needs in terms of work experience and use of English?
Is there relevant content?
Are the activities suitable for the target learners' levels and interests?

Learning Objectives What are the main learning objectives? (general language knowledge, specialist language knowledge, general communication skills, professional communication skills) How are grammar and vocabulary relevant to the context?
Methodological Approach Is the main methodological approach suitable for the target learners? Do the exercises help learners to practice relevant language and strategies? Do the activities mirror real life situations?
Naturalness of the language models Are authentic materials or samples of authentic spoken language used? Does the material contain features of spoken speech? Does the material contain features of spoken grammar?
Contextualization of the language Does the material provide contextualized examples? Does the material use discourse based interaction examples?
Learner autonomy Are the learners expected to take a degree of responsibility for their own learning? Does the material include advice/help to learners on learning strategies? Are self and peer evaluation tasks included?

Table II

Checklist for evaluating teaching material discourse

Transactional and relational talk Is both transactional and relational talk presented?
Specific situational language Are the functions and language appropriate for that situation?
Strategies Can learners use strategies to show politeness? Does the textbook show language to implement politeness?
Formality Does the material sensitize learners to different levels of formality for different contexts? Does the material provide examples and activities of different levels of formality for different situations?
Structure of meetings/emails/telephones conversations, etc. Is structure taught? Such as openings and closings, and different phrases. Are topic management skills taught, with signaling of opening and closing topics?
Cultural differences Do the materials sensitize learners to cultural differences? Do the activities help the learners to practice and build skills to manage cross cultural interactions? Is cultural stereotyping avoided?

II. ESP Needs in Asia

The next section will briefly discuss nine ESP research papers from around Asia, and from these contexts draw together the pertinent ESP needs in Asia.

Handford and Matous (2011) studied the interaction of Japanese and Hong Kong construction workers. They discovered that the Japanese staff used pronouns, like 'we', backchannels, vagueness, hedges and modality such as 'need to' and 'have to' instead of 'must do'. They concluded that these discourse features were used strategically to build solidarity and harmony. Kaewpet (2009) studied university civil engineers in

Thailand and Spence and Liu (2013) studied semi-conductor engineers in Taiwan. These studies showed a higher priority for the reading of technical materials (texts, journals, and publications), and writing reports, but as the students' careers progress there was more need for understanding accented English, developing oral communication skills, and building relationships. Kassim and Ali (2010) analyzed the needs of chemical engineers at ten Malaysian chemical engineering companies. They had a stronger need for oral communication for teleconferences, networking, and presenting. So they recommended teaching using task based engineering scenarios for these students. Moving away from engineers, Nickerson's (2009) study of a multinational company in Bangalore revealed that the staff needed writing skills to clarify, structure, and summarize, but more important was understanding the variety of accents, then being able to switch between direct and indirect approaches, to match the customers' cultural preference, while also avoiding conflict. Forey and Lockwood (2007) studied the interaction involved when business processes were outsourced by an American insurance company to a Filipino call center. This revealed that it was sometimes difficult for the staff to link the callers' purpose to the service they needed. There were poor interaction skills, and breakdowns in cultural understanding. For example, one of the customer's relatives had died, and the member of staff said "I apologize for your loss", which sounded cold, rather than 'I'm sorry for your loss', showing more sincere empathy. Warren's (2014) study of the four key sectors in Hong Kong showed that switching from direct to indirect speech was common in Hong Kong, but directness sometimes comes across as rude because there is a priority on meaning transfer. Finally, Tanaka (2009 & 2013) revealed that Japanese business interaction avoids conflict by being indirect, topic shifting and using hedging. People were reactive to maintain harmony and group consensus, which had a social and long term business function, and these were more highly valued than being assertive or independent.

These findings have been drawn together into an accessible table.

Table III

Some common ESP needs in Asia

Structuring written and spoken language
Interaction (interruptions, turn taking)
Q&A clarification
Understand accents
Show understanding (backchannels)
Follow changes in topics
Be aware of cultural norms
Directness/indirectness
Politeness & face
How to adapt language to different situations

A common need is to understand accents which are influenced by Asian L1 languages. There are common needs worldwide, to understand gist, and be able to give appropriate written and spoken responses, with regard to structure and directness. However, the area of most interest in Asia, is the idea of relational talk, and how to build and maintain relationships through teachable language. So by teaching strategies to monitor mutual comprehension empowers learners to be more effective communicators in cross-cultural contexts.

III. Cornelsen Teaching Methodology

The next section will introduce the Cornelsen textbook teaching methodology. There are seventeen titles, as shown in table IV.

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Table IV

Cornelsen Matters series textbooks

Textbook titles
Business Matters
Technical Matters
Industry Matters
Trade Matters
Electricity Matters
Office Matters
Money Matters
Shopping Matters
Legal Matters
Metal Matters
Insurance Matters
Mechatronics Matters
Health Matters
Dentistry Matters
Logistics Matters
I.T. Matters
Hotel Matters

These textbooks are aimed at the A2/B1 Common European Framework Levels, with some more challenging material for B2 intermediate level. The contents are genre specific, such as presentations, customer care and business travel in the business textbook; troubleshooting and problem solving in the technical textbook; and production, international conferences and dealing with inquiries in the industrial book. There are also various cases studies, such as a feature in the technical text explaining the mysterious circumstances of Rudolf Diesel's death, and the differences between diesel and gasoline engines.

It is not the aim of this article to differentiate between of content of titles such as Trade and Industry Matters, although this is important for training providers, to match the content with their students' interests and needs. Rather it is more fruitful to highlight the teaching methodology and then draw comparisons with the ESP needs stated above.

To do this the first chapter of the Business Matters textbook was analyzed. Initially, there is some contextual setting, and introduction of various formulaic phrases. The reading comprehension activity is followed by a paraphrasing task. After that, a vocabulary gap fill exercise requires collocations to be inserted, which help the students to build phrasal units. In the role play the students have to generate their own language, which engages them more actively in their learning. This could be improved if the students have some preparation time. For example, before describing the company tour, and how to show interest, there could be some strategy instruction to prepare and visualize the situation which would help students to recall relevant vocabulary. A longer reading text follows, for building content knowledge, and this is backed up by a summarizing activity, which gives an opportunity to practice paraphrasing and structuring ideas.

For the listening activities, all the audio files are downloadable from the Cornelsen website, which is highlighted on the back page. However, they seemed a little staged and artificial. More natural production speed, with some hesitations and overlap, like you would hear in natural talk, would be better. Having said that, for my students, who are about thirty year old engineers, they said it was a good level for them, because the pausing allowed them more processing or comprehension time. So the listening samples appear to be targeted at the A2/B1 level.

For the self-evaluation test-yourself section in each chapter, there is a role play where the students can generate any kind of language they want to complete the task. However, to compare their ideas, it would be beneficial to add a checklist or offer some follow-up scaffolded paraphrasing phrases to support the students to be able to compare their ideas, rather than just reading through the list of differences.

The extra material at the end of the chapter is a more in-depth reading passage about different company types focusing on business content, which is then related to student knowledge. The students have an opportunity to prepare, structure and present their ideas. There are also task based case studies occasionally throughout the textbook, where students can study the authentic context, understand their roles, then conduct role plays. Similarly, there are writing activities to generate their own language, by writing summaries and emails, which gives more opportunities for feedback and reflection on their grammar usage.

IV. Discussion

The textbooks have discussions about formal and informal language, and they do recommend more formal language in most business situations. Indirect or polite language is taught for talking to customers via emails or telephone calls. This is structured to have an introduction, some background, highlighting the

reason for the interaction, and then the point of action. So there is cohesive teaching of this formal structure. However, often emails and telephone calls, are not straightforward, and need multiple emails, or the ability to change direction in a conversation. So this flexibility and the ability to adapt direct or indirect language appropriate to the situation is not covered. There are also useful tips, such as explaining that different cultures have different preferences about social interaction, but it does not show examples of how these differences materialize in the conversation.

On a more positive note, the audio samples do feature a range of accents, such as American, English, German, Spanish, Irish, Indian, and Singaporean accents. However, there is still a bias towards European accents. There is listening for key information and gist, as expected, but the audio files sounded staged, with actors not using natural interaction features, like overlap, quicker turn taking, or changes in topic. Having said that, for lower level listening development, over-pronounced talk and longer than normal pausing, maybe a reasonable step. One extract showed a telephone conversation where someone asked for clarification, with a tip about the importance of clarification skills, but the language is still a little prescribed. It is a nice example, but clarification examples should be built into more audio files, to give frequent models of how people normally interact.

Another example of combining authentic language into activities is a section on modal verbs. It shows the grammatical differences between modal verbs, followed by gap fill activities. To give the grammar context, and meaning, it is followed by a role play with a customer, highlighting the power and distance between the roles. There is some imposition and inconvenience when requesting to change an order. So modal verbs are naturally needed in this situation and it is a well-constructed set of activities. It would be a useful addition to explain that modal verbs are often used to reflect the social relationships and validity of what is being said. The contextual link is important for students' contextual understanding of language usage.

The last example is about small talk, where a Brazilian man is chatting to a German business man in a restaurant in Brazil. The audio sample is followed by some specific detail questions, some sequencing, and some small talk advice about giving response tokens. Then in the freestyle section, there is an opportunity to practice making small talk. Again the activity looks good, but there should be more modelling of authentic response tokens in all the audio files and transcripts, because response tokens and follow-up questions in small talk are crucial for building relations.

V.   Conclusion

These textbooks contain vocabulary recycling, synonym matching and paraphrasing. The grammar examples are progressive and linked into task based activities. Spoken and written structure is taught. There is generative language in role plays, summarizing, and presenting ideas to build flexibility and transferable language use. The ESP genres available provide opportunity to develop content knowledge and professional skills. However, some of the audio and language phrases are prescribed rather than describing natural interaction patterns. Similarly, comprehending changes in topic, and more explicit relational features are not taught. There are self-evaluation role plays, but there should be more strategic learning advice to support autonomous development.

If the students want to communicate in intercultural Business settings, then being assertive is an important skill to have. *"Assertiveness means standing up for your personal rights - expressing thoughts, feelings and beliefs in direct, honest and appropriate ways."* (Concise Oxford Dictionary). The kind of activities that support this are helping students to make decisions, while accommodating other people's opinions in group settings. Also being able to summarize, and present ideas in a clear, structured and logical way. These books are providing opportunities to develop assertive behaviors. Appropriate ways, however, suggests having the awareness to realize that the difference in context, affects the language used, and having the range of structures to be flexible in how meaning is expressed. This is not the focus of these textbooks. In these textbooks, the writers teach basic pragmatic language, and then the higher level Cornelsen books, such as *Simply Business: Effective English for doing your job,* introduces more flexibility, for example adapting language, turn taking, direct and indirect language flexibility, and writing across or between cultures.

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