Linking ESP Needs Assessment and Research

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Introductory Notes
Focus

Very frequently there’s a “disconnect” between researchers in Professional Communications and those delivering English for Specific Purposes (ESP) programs. The presenter, using a research study, and an ESP project, shows how researchers and ESP practitioners can and need to connect.
Examining a Research Study & an ESP Project

Research Article on Fast Food Service Encounters: How Do You Like Your Cereal? A Linguistic Analysis of a Service Encounter by Caroline Kennelly Isaacs

Needs Assessment Project in an ESP course: A local fast food store of a national chain

How can the research study inform an ESP project even if the context is not quite the same? What are the limits of relevance?
Outline of Presentation

I. Overview/ Review of LSP/ESP basics
II. Introduction to issues in linking research to LSP/ESP
III. Some preliminary linking strategies
IV. Introduction to a real ESP worksite context/project
V. Examination of research article (guided walk-through)
VI. Some limitations*
VII. Additional considerations*

*If using presentation in a professional development session, these asterisked points might be openers for discussion.
Supplementary Materials Provided with this Presentation

- Worksheet: Discussion Themes - generally applicable across research articles
- Abstract of article on fast food service, CerealLand, with URL link to full article
- Worksheet: Outline of CerealLand article
Short Forms Used

NES = Native English speaking (speakers)
NNES = Non-native English speaking (speakers)
CL = CerealLand, anonymized name of establishment in research study
Local Fast Food = anonymized name of establishment in ESP project
I. Overview/ Review of LSP/ESP Basics
Languages for Specific Purposes-LSP

--Learner-centered second /foreign Language training
--Needs-based, involving all stakeholders
--Collaboration with workplace/ content experts
--Use of authentic tasks & materials

Focuses on design and delivery of courses for academic students or students preparing to work in specific fields
OR
Learners already working -- who need English or other language as a tool in their place of work/profession.
“LSP” and “ESP” are frequently used together in this presentation.

- Same basic research strategies, needs assessment, and project development principles apply across languages.

- LSP: Language for Specific Purposes, the umbrella category which can include any language being taught for specific purposes, e.g.
  --Spanish for Emergency Healthcare Workers,
  --Mandarin Chinese for Contract Negotiation,
  --Japanese for Foreign Currency Exchange Clerks, etc.

In this presentation the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) context involves the communication needs of employees in fast food service encounters in the USA.
II. Introduction to issues in linking research to LSP/ESP
LSP/ESP: Research

- Workplace/ Professional Communications Research, per se, NOT LSP/ESP tho’ that claim is sometimes made

- Research on communications in various settings can be
  - a valuable tool in the needs analysis process
  
  &

  - findings can provide insights i.e. research community on professional communications
  
  BUT
LSP/ESP Applicability

To be LSP/ESP-related research

- Needs to address gaps for specific NNSs
- Needs to address needs of second/foreign language learners

However---

- A language audit of an institution identifies scope, communication types, problem areas, & might provide native speaker baseline.
- Narrowly focused, independent research studies might provide insights and data.
Disconnect between Research & Practice
Some Researchers Frustrated--Findings Aren’t Valued by LSP Practitioners

LSP Practitioner

Researcher
Some LSP/ESP Practitioners have difficulty with research articles written primarily for other researchers

I read the research articles... **BUT...**

Relevance? Comprehensibility?
Some Places: Collaboration between Practitioners & Researchers
For example...

Ulla Connor
Director

William Rozycki
Assoc. Director

The ICIC research team also includes experts in language, communication, and business from the Indiana U. & Purdue U. campuses, incl. graduate students as well as international colleagues, associates & advisors from a wide variety of fields.
III. Some preliminary linking strategies

Finding Collaborating Partners
Building Workplace Links: History of Collaboration with Hotel

Local Hotel
1. A graduate student served as an interpreter for Hispanic employees during certain hotel employee meetings.

2. Practicum requirement: Graduate student did practicum at hotel, providing free English language training. As her supervisor, I worked with her in a team teaching situation. Certificates were issued and photos of them were sent to the hotel. Then later, with permission of hotel housekeepers, their photos were used in a presentation in Moscow on workplace English.

3. In ESP course, twice preliminary needs analyses were done, 3 yrs apart, each time a different focus to meet management’s changing priorities.

4. Provided give-back of 1-2 hours of free instruction

Hotel as Venue for ESP Training Courses
Used hotel for needs assessment (Italy, Venezuela)
Building Workplace Links: History of Collaboration with Fast Food Establishment

Local Fast Food Establishment (of national chain)

Used as a site for ESP teacher training course, university-based workplace collaboration over time—collaboration not instant

1. Students did a small survey of industry/service sections in their geographical areas to determine
   --where employees were NNES
   --where communication was a problem.

   Hotels and fast food establishments were frequently mentioned, and specific businesses were identified.

2. In a subsequent ESP course a preliminary needs analyses done along with proposal for additional needs analysis small scale training efforts. Proposal submitted to business.
Building Links within Academic Institution

Coordinate w/ Instructors in Graduate Courses:

**Intro to Linguistics, Sociolinguistics, etc**

Identify course projects that call for data gathering and analysis, even if small scale, related to worksites

**Methods of Research**

Encourage development of a relevant research design related to worksites
A possible next step in an ESP course or other graduate course...

Follow up with fast food establishment (or other workplace setting)

- For brief training sessions with one group of employees
- Examine related research & workplace best practices in preparation for a more detailed needs assessment.
- Gain permission for a more detailed needs assessment of front counter or drive-through employees
Link Up with Research

- Look for existing research on same or similar service situations to gain insights, leads

- Find research support for focused analysis
  funded or grad student research projects in courses
IV. Introduction to a real ESP worksite context, project

This section has brief notes on a class project with a fast food establishment.

Course objectives were to have graduate students think outside of academic setting and become aware of some strategies in doing an LSP/ESP needs assessment.

A detailed needs assessment was not possible in time available.

This laid the groundwork for a possible ESP project in a subsequent ESP course.
Fast Food Establishment
Eastern Pennsylvania USA

Need:
Non-native English speaking employees: language proficiency affects job assignments ➔ income

Goal of project:
Preliminary needs assessment ➔ recommendations for
• training
• workplace modifications
Preliminary (!) Needs Assessment Plan

A. Front Counter Service**
   Observations
   + Feedback from Supervisor

B. Drive-Thru Service - Observation + Feedback from Supervisor
   (advanced skills)

C. Group Interview – Non-native English speaking Employees
Safety and Security

Another Areas of Need

• **Need#1a**: Possibly Interpreting for local fire department in annual fire extinguisher demonstration

• **Need#1b**: Follow-up on high priority English communication needs related to fire extinguisher use

• **Who**: All employees especially Grill workers
Front Counter Literacy Need

The following slide is an impressionistic version of a touch-order screen in the local Fast Food establishment. It is not an official version. It was created by one of the graduate students in the ESP project.

It illustrates the type of front counter literacy needed in usually rapid interactions with customers.
Recommendations for Communication Training Needs

1. Assess Safety and Security Communication Needs
2. Identify Individual Goals
3. Record of Customer Interactions w/ NES employees & analyze
4. Record NNES’s Interactions with Customers & analyze
5. Deliver Specific Workplace Language Training

(Graduate students-researchers also made other supplementary suggestions not detailed here.)
Some Recommendations to all employees for communicating with NNES customers

- Speak and respond in short statements and standard English to customers’ questions.
- Confirm what exactly the customer wants.
- Special orders, such as “no cheese,” “no-lettuce,” and “extra-onion,” can be a problem.

Recommend: laminated food visuals at each register + card of symbol \(\not\) representing “no” as in “no onions” or “no pickles”
Some next questions:

1. How could research findings on service encounters inform further ESP work with this local fast food establishment?

2. Can the strategies for relating research on service encounters to this ESP project assist others with accessing and making use of related research?

3. Can the strategies for relating research to a concrete ESP project assist graduate students in becoming more aware of what LSP/ESP is and of the importance of building on existing research and collaborating with researchers.
V. Examination of research article

(guided walk-though)
Examining a Research Study

1. To determine its purpose

2. To identify possible relevance to a prospective ESP program

3. To consider how findings can inform needs assessment

4. To consider gaps requiring local needs assessment.

Strategies are considered for linking up ESP practitioners with researchers.

(Same content as Worksheet on Discussion Themes)
Research Article on Fastfood Service Encounters

How Do You Like Your Cereal? A Linguistic Analysis of a Service Encounter

Caroline Kennelly Isaacs
Graduate School of Education

University of Pennsylvania

http://www.wpel.net/v21/v21n2_Isaacs.pdf
This study investigates customers’ responses to the phrase, *How do you like your cereal?*, a question posed by servers at a cereal café. This phrase, along with several variants, abrogates linguistic service encounter norms, and customer response type is heavily influenced by the type and content of the servers’ questions. The data indicate that certain types of questions encourage direct orders from customers, whereas other questions, namely *How do you like your cereal?*, provoke disfluencies and confusion among customers. An analysis of how the questions violate linguistic norms is given, along with why customers interpret some questions as requests for information and others as ordering prompts.

(Same as Abstract handout)
Preparation Reminders
if materials are to be used in training over several hours

• Allow time to read article before continuing with Power Point Presentation and Use of Handouts

• Remind workshop participants to keep in mind the local Fast Food case presented earlier—and imagine fast food sites they know.
Fast Food Service Interactions

Research Article on CerealLand (CL=CerealLand)

Are there implications for a local ESP fast food project?
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(Same content as Worksheet on Discussion Themes)
1. To determine its purpose

Purpose of Research
(from Abstract)

“This study investigates customers’ responses to the phrase, *How do you like your cereal?*, a question posed by servers at a cereal café.

*   *   *

“An analysis of how the questions violate linguistic norms is given, along with why Customers interpret some questions as requests for information and others as ordering prompts.
2. To identify possible relevance to a prospective ESP program

Workplace Research
(from Literature Review & Elsewhere)

Can find insights on organizing and doing a Needs Analysis, on data collection format, insights on data analysis, insights on Results, and reinforce linguistic course content

Example:
Findings on features in conversation analyses of sales--service encounters
- Adjacency pairs
- Functions of *greeting, asking for information, request for service*
  and customer perceptions, responses
- Use of formulas, open-ended, handling unexpected customer responses
- Pauses—silent & filled, use in cognitively challenging situations
- Hypothesis that when people orally begin listing, there is a tendency to “need” to list 3 items, and if only list 2, there is a tendency to fill in the empty slot with something
2. To identify possible relevance to a prospective ESP program

**Insights from Methodology**

**Data gathering**

--Effect of awareness by servers of study

--Gaining permission for research

--Consciousness of physical setting & effect on shape of interactions

--Others?

(to be suggested by workshop/ course participants)
Findings on Formulaic Language

Company policies set for customer interaction—in order to present an image

1. CerealLand: By using conversational opening, CL Formula, *How do you like your cereal?* to make customers feel happy—but Does it work? Does it support effective service?

2. Local Fast Food: Need to identify company’s formulas and allowed variation

Possible link to local Fast Food NNES employees: Can limited flexibility in English lead to more disfluencies?
Findings on Formulaic Language

3. Tension between CL Formula policies & instincts of Servers
4. Use of CL Formulas more customer disfluencies than when used own NCL patterns (natural adaptations)
5. Customer responses to various Server questions showed -problems with modal use in CLFormula
6. Server adjustments to customer disfluencies or perceived awkwardness

3. To consider how findings can inform needs assessment
3. To consider how findings can inform needs assessment

Some Questions and Implications

1. Does Fast Food Restaurant formulas have potential for creating similar customer disfluencies when used by NSs?

2. Do Fast Food Restaurant native-speaker employees use variations and what are the effects?

3. Would a non-native English speaking employee at Fast Food Restaurant
   --be intelligible in use of formulas?
   --have flexibility to go beyond formulas?
   --have flexibility to adjust to customer confusion and disfluencies?

4. Insights can aid in some questions in organizational needs analysis and setting up research efforts as part of further needs analyses.

5. Identify policies, priorities and insights of local Fast Food management have regarding nature of communication breakdowns especially of NNESs.
Spin-off Assignments based on CerealLand Article

Possible graduate student research studies

- Examination of service encounters in single site, NES employees
- Compare findings with earlier related studies
- Special focus on disfluencies by customers in interaction

Possible link to local Fast Food NNES employees: Can limited flexibility in English lead to more disfluencies?
Possible Areas of Collaboration with Researchers

What research questions can be of interest to a Researcher and at the same time inform or actually assist the needs assessment of an ESP project?

Work with researcher(s) to

- Record Customer Interactions w/ NES employees & analyze
- Record NNES’s Interactions with customers & analyze
VI. Some limitations

Possible Discussion Points

1. What are the limitations of CerealLand study for the local Fast Food project?

2. What gaps need to be considered in local needs assessment?

Workshop participants would be encouraged to provide their own ideas before seeing the next slide.
A Few Limitations of Research Study for ESP Project

- Can’t assume same language/ vocabulary—obviously different food

- Can’t assume same interaction patterns—need to observe local Fast Food Restaurant practices/policies.

- Local Fast Food Restaurant has more non-native speaker employees. Will this mean possibly more disfluencies in interactions with customers?

- Research was not designed to identify communication needs of non-native speakers. Study provides useful native-speaker baseline data, but no data on how a non-native speaker employee might handle these situations, on strategies.
VII. Additional considerations
Additional Thoughts by Presenter

1. At local Fast Food restaurant: Are any non-native speakers particularly successful in interactions? If so, what strategies do they use?

2. Issues concerning how data is recorded: Should at least use audio or better video, if possible, and apply Conversational Analysis, fine-grained analysis.

   Written notes miss a lot.

3. Consider getting Fast Food Restaurant to fund research.
Additional comments from TESOL 07 audience*

1. Does the sequence of 3 have anything to do with intonations in Qs?

2. Consider the timing of observations in terms of rush periods in service: “rush” time might affect performance. Separate data for analysis based on time.

*Contributors’ names were not recorded but contributions were greatly appreciated.
References

Please refer to the bibliographic references at the end of the CerealLand article for references on service-encounters and related topics. Below are the journals (not the articles) in which related research was found. These may also be useful resources for workplace-related interactions in other contexts.

*American Anthropologist*
*Grazer linguistische Studien*
*Journal of Psycholinguistic Research*
*Language in Society*
*Language*
*Pragmatics*
*Semiotica*

No attempt has been in this presentation to list relevant books.
Additional Resources

Some Additional Journals
- *English for Specific Purposes Journal*
- *Discourse Studies*
- *Journal of Business Communication*

Specific Industry Sector Communication Competencies
from national standards/competencies frameworks, local training institutions, and national professional/vocational organizations.

Specific Workplace Standards/Principles
A very important resource is the specific workplace site involved. The workplace promotes certain communication practices which reinforce, for example, the image the hotel wishes to promote. These can be found in a hotel’s training manual (which might be proprietary, but perhaps management can be persuaded that the dissemination of the contents will be limited/protected). Also hotels usually have a simple list, of easy-to-remember best practices or “rules” for guest relations/communications, etc.