Products to train tourism professionals: a valuable source of ESP materials to raise genre awareness and achieve sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences

Mª Nuria Borrull Cubo
Univesitat de les Illes Balears

Abstract

Undoubtedly, linguistic auditing, specialist informants, and in-company observation are the most reliable tools available to the ESP practitioner/researcher who aims at analysing the genres used in tourism professional settings in order to design tasks to supplement existing English for Tourism textbooks. This type of research is, however, not always possible. If the discourse community we should study, i.e. the actual professionals, is not at hand, why not trying its closest relatives: the trainers of tourism professionals?

The purpose of this paper is to show that products (i.e. textbooks, multi-media courses, etc.) to train tourism professionals in English-speaking countries can be a valuable source of materials as they can serve a twofold purpose. On the one hand, they can help ESP teachers determine student’s needs for specific genres, and identify genre and discourse patterns. On the other hand, these training products -though obviously not addressed to linguists- often describe the sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences students must acquire to successfully perform their jobs in specific professional settings. Therefore, the tasks we design will perfectly conform to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

Key words: English for Tourism, genre analysis, materials, tasks design, Common European Framework or Reference for Languages.

Bridging the gap

Needs analysis and ESP began their joint venture as long ago as in the 1970s and discussion on how to carry out needs analysis has kept applied linguists busy for more than three decades now. Amongst the techniques developed we would like to highlight three: linguistic audits (Reeves and Wright, 1996; Huhta, 2002), specialist informants (Bahtia, 1993), and in-company observation (Jasso-Aguilar, 1999).

Their value as instruments to identify the specific language needs of a particular organization, and consequently of their present and potential employees –i.e. vocational and university students– is unquestionable. What we do question here is whether such tools are available to an ESP practitioner with the following profile: a teacher of English for Tourism (hereinafter referred to as EfT) at university or vocational schools who uses EfT textbooks as core teaching materials, but needs to design supplementary tasks.

Whenever EfT teachers have to come to grips with creating or adapting materials, the first drawback they face is obtaining accurate and reliable information on the genres and discourse patterns used in the targeted professional settings. If we are to be realistic, we must admit that few vocational EfT teachers, if any, have the time to carry out linguistic audits, contact specialist informants or spend their time within a company in order to determine language needs and uses. These techniques are not only impracticable for vocational teachers because they are time-consuming; to a certain extent, they are also impracticable for university teachers and researchers. Although the latter do have the time to research, they have to overcome a further stumbling block: companies in the
tourism industry often show little understanding for the task of the linguistic researcher, either because they are not familiar with it, or simply because they are not interested in such type of research. Bathia (1993: 35) also makes this point in his renowned book on genre analysis:

In the first place, it is difficult to find a truly resourceful specialist informant. Secondly, it takes quite an effort, time and understanding to develop a common understanding of the purpose of enquiry. It is not always easy to ensure that the two parties, with their differing background knowledge, are able to speak the same language.

Our proposal, and the aim of this paper, is to show that we can bridge the gap between the EfT teacher and corporations in the tourism industry by analysing and adapting the contents of methods to train professionals in the sector. First, we will discuss the methods we believe to be most suitable, and explain why. Then, we will go a step further to demonstrate that the chosen methods lend themselves quite well to genre analysis. Finally, we will focus on a further advantage: training products also help EfT teachers conform to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

Choosing the right sources

We would like to put forward a set of criteria to select training products as sources for materials to be used in the EfT classroom:

1. Look for training materials published or supported by renowned educational institutions either in the private or the public sectors of English-speaking countries. We have found the following sources to be of particular interest:
   - Courses designed by prestigious educational institutions for in-company training.
   - Textbooks used in the UK to obtain vocational qualifications (GNVQs, NVQs, Vocational A-levels, BTECs, etc.) in the areas of hospitality, catering, leisure, recreation, travel and tourism.

2. Consider the level of English used in terms of style and vocabulary range. Textbooks for vocational education and courses for in-company training normally use a communicative style which facilitates its adaptation for ELT purposes. Methods for vocational education offer a further advantage: they are written according to level, and the level of difficulty is not only related to content but also to language use.

3. If vocational textbooks are chosen, select a publisher which is also involved in ELT. We have noticed that when a publisher features both a range of textbooks for tourism studies and a series of courses on EfT, the tourism specific contents in both types of books are closely related. A further advantage is that new editions of textbooks on tourism are published almost every year, while the renewal of EfT textbooks takes much longer. Thus, textbooks on tourism become an excellent source of supplementary, up-to-date materials.

4. If you choose in-company training courses, cast a critical eye on training styles. There might be cultural-bound gaps that could make training materials
unsuitable for teaching English to your students. Here is an example: we found the “Front Office Quality Service” video courses published in 1992 by the Educational Institute of the American Hotel and Longing Association (AH&LA) extremely useful for EfT teaching purposes. Their contents could be perfectly approached from a genre analysis perspective, and we used them to design tasks which worked quite well in our EfT classes. This is why we had been looking forward to a new updated edition which was finally launched in 2005 with the title: “The Spirit of Hospitality”. To our disappointment, we found it unsuitable, not only for teaching English, but even for teaching hospitality. The new version contains a whole range of sociocultural elements (mainly gestures, and visual special effects) which are so typically American, and so informal, that we found the whole recording very naïve and far less professional than the 1992 edition.

Training products as a source of information about genres

EfT teachers not only need to familiarise themselves with the tasks involved in tourism-related jobs, but they also need to know what is considered good practice (i.e. what interpersonal and sociocultural skills are required). In applied linguistics terms, they need to know about the genres (both oral and written) used by a particular discourse community in a particular professional setting, coupled with the sociolinguistic features that characterise discourse in professional tasks and encounters.

Let’s first have a look at genres. Materials designed for vocational training in tourism describe the tasks related to each job from customer service to managerial positions. Regarding written genres, they provide the EfT teacher with reliable information about the documents involved in every task from simple reservation forms to complex reports. The EfT teacher only needs to lay those documents under the genre analysis magnifying glass in order to investigate which “rationale shapes the schematic structure of discourse and influences and constrains choice of content and style” (Swales, 1990: 58). Once layout, moves, discourse patterns, and vocabulary range (technical, sub-technical and general; Trimble, 1985; Alcaraz, 2000) have been identified the EfT teacher will have a clear-cut framework to design and structure language learning tasks.

As far as oral genres are concerned, training materials describe what techniques are considered successful to perform well in personal interaction in professional encounters, again from the reception desk to the board of directors. Techniques on how to use the telephone, deal effectively with complaints, make successful presentations, be good negotiators at meetings, etc. often include a procedure which is described step by step. Steps in procedures give us a fairly close idea of what moves make up a specific genre and what the rhetorical structure is. Case examples are often included in training materials, and they provide the EfT teacher with samples of real language use.

Here is an example: the AH&LA Educational Institute (1992) suggests a four steps method to deal with complaints at a hotel’s reception desk: listen, respond, act, and follow up. Precise instructions are given about what must be done and said to carry out every step professionally. By “Listening” the trainers mean that a receptionist must: give the guest his/her undivided attention, acknowledge the guest and the complaint, empathise, ask questions to determine the exact complaint, and repeat the complaint in his/her own words to confirm that the complaint has been fully understood. Right, if this
is what trainers consider a good receptionist should do, then this is also what we must teach our learners of EfT. This step becomes the first move in an oral genre which could be named: “handling verbal complaints”.

The step “Respond” is divided into two: “Apologise” and “Solve”. EfT students will learn that that “solving” means telling the customer what will be done, when it will be done and who will be doing it. For us, EfT teachers, that will be the second move in the oral genre; and so on and so forth.

On checking a textbook for teaching Vocational A-Levels in Travel and Tourism in Britain we found a flow chart which also describes what steps must be taken to deal with complaints effectively (Dale & Oliver, 2000: 342). The steps in the flow chart and the ones included in the video published by the AH&LA Educational Institute are almost identical. The textbook, unlike the video course, does not provide examples of language use but confirms what the procedures expected by the discourse community to “handle verbal complaints” are. In other words, it confirms that we are on the right way to genre identification.

Training products and the Common European Framework

The CEF describes communicative language competences as being three: linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic. Next, we would like to discuss why we believe that whenever EfT teachers use training products to carry out genre analysis and create materials, they will be able to both teach the language and highlight the sociolinguistic and pragmatic dimensions of language use.

According to the CEF’s taxonomy, pragmatic competences are divided into two: discourse and functional competences. The CEF does not use the concept of “genre” or “genre analysis”, but among its discourse competences it refers to “text design”, which is defined as the “knowledge of the design conventions in the community concerning” (Council of Europe, 2001: 123). Regarding “functional competences”, they are described as those “concerned with the use of spoken discourse and written texts in communication for a particular functional purpose” (Council of Europe, 2001: 125), which is also the research field of genre analysis.

Functional competence is described as being concerned with using “microfunctions” and “macrofunctions” according to formal or informal patterns of social interaction (schemata). As we have seen above, training materials (especially those that feature case examples or simulations recorded in any kind of audio-visual format) are ideal to teach the expressions and lexicalised phrases used in what the CEF calls “microfunctions” (asking, answering, greeting, apologising, empathising, expressing agreement, disagreement, dissatisfaction, etc.). We have also seen that training materials can illustrate longer pieces of discourse with a specific functional use, for example: explaining what action will be taken to restore guest satisfaction after a complaint has been placed. Explanation, description, instruction, argumentation, persuasion, etc., i.e. “macrofunctions” (if we use the CEF’s terminology) and “rethorical functions” (if we use Trimble’s, 1985) are embedded in genres.
Another aspect we have focused on is that training products include techniques to interact efficiently in professional settings, i.e. procedures to achieve effective communication in the workplace, which are described step by step. The ability “to interact and communicate well […] in a variety of working situations” (Burton & Burton, 1994) is also referred to as “interpersonal skills” in tourism training. What tourism industry trainers call “interpersonal skills” does not only involve the ability to use “schemata” (pragmatic competence), but also the ability to “deal with the social dimension of language” (sociolinguistic competence, Council of Europe 2001: 118).

Let’s have a look at a few examples by going back to the two training methods referred to above. The following recommendations for dealing with complaints can be found in the textbook on Leisure and Tourism for Vocational A-levels (Dale & Oliver, 2000: 343): “maintain eye contact; keep a positive, even, tone of voice; use positive non-verbal body language; listen actively; let the client talk”. This is a clear reference to the schematic knowledge the student must acquire. The EfT teacher only needs to draw his/her students’ attention on those recommendations, make them notice what verbal and non-verbal (body) language they are referring to and, additionally, elicit from students any contrastive features between the way complaints are dealt with in the two cultures (those of the L1 and L2).

Regarding the teaching of sociolinguistic competences (i.e. the ability to recognise linguistic markers of social interaction, politeness conventions, expressions of folk wisdom, etc.) the AH&LA’s 1992 video recording proved to be very useful. Firstly, the video shows ways of greeting, address forms, and conventions for turntaking related to the interaction customer-receptionist. Secondly, it shows a number of expressions and/or lexicalised phrases that need to be used to “sound professional” when dealing with complaints, such as: “this must be most upsetting”; or “I would feel the same, Sir/Madam”; or “I fully understand how you feel” to empathise; and “I apologise for the inconvenience you have suffered” to apologise. Finally, it also includes expressions of folk wisdom such as idioms and proverbs related to the expression of anger and dissatisfaction. Such is the case of a conference coordinator who complains about the insufficient number of chairs in a conference room and asks the receptionist if they “must play musical chairs”.

Conclusion

We encourage teachers of English for Tourism to adapt training products to language teaching, not only because they contain up-to-date, reliable information on subject contents, but also because they describe the job-related skills a student of tourism must gain (needs analysis), the oral and written tasks he/she will be involved in (genres), and the interpersonal skills he must develop (pragmatic and sociolinguistic competences).

Since quality training products are constantly updated, they describe quite accurately and reliably what the tourism industry demands from their trainees/employees. From an applied linguistics perspective, these training products offer the EfT practitioner accurate and reliable information on specific language needs and can make up for time-consuming in-company research.
References


