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Negotiation Focus: Needs Analysis on English for Rapport Management

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Abstract
Studies on English for Specific Purposes (ESP) continue to grow but the majority of them still focuses on writing, perpetuating the fundamental gap between educational and workplace contexts. ESP classes for negotiations critically need to include interpersonal relationship-building and sensemaking skills to offer practical values to learners. To show the importance of re-evaluating the way negotiation is taught in ESP classes, this case study discusses the results of needs analysis (NA) for English for rapport management in negotiations from three different stakeholders- the language teacher, learners and an industrial expert. The respondents for this study include two second language students receiving formal training for negotiations, a language teacher at the university's English language training programme for diplomats, and an industrial expert with over two decades of business negotiation experiences. Discussions from the NA include the use of pronouns in negotiations, safe topics in small talks, and meeting and negotiation preparedness to prepare aspiring negotiators to pursue interactions that are interculturally difficult. Findings from the NA have implications for future negotiation lesson and curriculum designs.
Keywords: ESP, Higher Education, Needs Analysis, Negotiation, Rapport Management.

Introduction

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) have continued to grow in demands and research (Hyland and Jiang, 2021; Liu and Hu, 2021; Salmani-Nodoushan, 2020). As the name suggests, "specificity" in ESP programmes is continually debated due to the nature of its language learning experience which are tailored to prepare learners for the immediate needs of their (future) careers. Lockwood (2007) claims that despite decades and abundance of research literature in adult English language teaching curriculum design, there are still fundamental gaps between the educational and workplace contexts. Chan (2018) maintains similar belief to Lockwood's, arguing that it is rare to find published reports of business English learners' needs being identified and addressed in the curriculum development for specific business English topics. In practice, these learners' needs will continue to change due to the dynamics of work environments, but it should interest instructional coordinators and educators to actively include learners' needs in both lesson and curriculum designs. In many cases, teachers and educators enter the classroom with a pre-designed curriculum and syllabus from their educational institutions. Although teachers are likely to have little say over the two, educators have some flexibility and autonomy over their lesson materials and delivery to fit the learners' specific needs, especially in the case of working adult learners who generally (if not specifically) know why they are taking a language class. Having open and direct discussions with learners about their demands and needs is not a novel approach, in 1987, Hutchinson and Waters discussed in length about learner-centred approach in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) as a logical consequence to the global rise of ESP due to the pragmatic acceptance of English as the language for commerce and specialised fields. They argued that offering descriptive, language centred approach for ESP would no longer hold a lasting value in a world where learners came with working knowledge of how the English language functions in their respective fields. Equally so, we cannot deny the benefits of language items' lessons in ESP, but contexts should be the pre-requisite to serving the purpose of specific courses such as ESP. In lieu of that, this case study discusses the needs analysis (NA) conducted to inform future lesson design for the topic of business English, *rapport management,* for public officials participating in a language training course. The study attempts to document a small-scale NA among three major voices that can influence the ESP lesson planning in class; they are the teacher, learners and the field expert.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for the case study is Goffman's face-work (1967). He defines *face* as the positive self-image one claims as their social identity or public self-image. According to his theory, we attach emotional response to our social "face" and when the face is threatened, *face-work*, a counter-action to preserve *face* needs to be undertaken so the person do not become embarrassed, shamefaced or "lose face" during social encounters. Goffman's notion of face was then used by Brown and Levinson (1987) to construct the theory of politeness, in which they proposed that competent adults in society have *positive face* (the person's desire that their actions are not hampered by others) and *negative face* (the person's desire that their actions and wants are pleasant to others)- and that the adults have reasonable capacities to reach their social goals to maintain those faces. Planken (2002) adapts the theory of face into her studies of negotiation, claiming that facework builds relationships that helps negotiators attain positive outcomes for both interactional and transactional goals of the exchange. While the theory of face has undergone re-conceptualisations, the social element of building agreeable interpersonal relationships and protecting face, such as someone's social value and position, maintains as a way to facilitate positive interactions.

Rapport Management

The topic rapport management in negotiation is chosen for this entry due to two factors. Firstly, although a growing number of universities is offering ESP courses for working adults, in her survey review, McDonough (2010) reported that a whopping 85% of the key journal in the field was concerned with academic-context English rather than industrial or the workplace needs. Among that, only one article studied professional communication. This demonstrates the gap between offered ESP courses and workplace contexts, placing the weight of the language training on descriptive and prescriptive language skills, rather than focusing on dynamic, authentic data from professional settings. Secondly, Putnam (2010) critiques that early literature around communication and negotiation skills paid most attention on bargaining strategies and tactics, often factoring out how meanings were constructed by negotiators. Along the same line, Hyland and Jiang (2021) recently traced the last three decades of ESP research by analysing over 3,000 papers on the Social Science Citation Index. Although they found that the theme *professional development* has dramatically increased since 1990, *writing* is still the most constant theme in ESP research. The report suggests that research interests in professional verbal communication is still inferior to writing, even when research about professional development has significantly increased over the last thirty years. In reality, negotiations involve a lot of people skills and soft strategies. ESP lesson designs should factor in *sensemaking*- how communicators use language to go through a process of understanding one another, reaching an agreeable outcome and maintaining good rapport even after bargaining is concluded.

Rapport management is crucial in negotiations as language is not only used to deliver meaning, but also functions in interactional speech as the medium to manage social relations, build relationships and create agreeable interpersonal exchanges (Planken, 2005). One crucial skill in building satisfactory communication climate is *facework*, in which interlocutors need to make dynamic judgements to make sense of and meet the social expectations and sensitivities of the other speaker (Spencer-Oatey, 2005). They must consider what is appropriate to say to ensure harmonious interactions and avoid making the other interlocutor *lose face*.

Face is vulnerable; it can be enhanced or threatened by social circumstances (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998). Maintaining someone's individual value of face preserves their social identity and dignity. All this points to the logical conclusion that rapport management is a crucial skill in business negotiation, diplomatic missions and conflict management.

Methodology

To highlight the need to be sensitive to local education models and expectations (Hyland, 2007), the teacher's and learner's perspectives in this study were of participants from the same university, which also offered an English language training programme for official delegates from developing countries. The training programme is the university's relationship-building English language training for Asian and African public officials, and also part of the university's School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies. I volunteered as a *speaking buddy* at the language training programme, so I developed good relations with the learners and language staff in the programme. This is important so they would feel comfortable sharing their teaching experiences and learning journey for this study.

This case study collected data from three different perspectives, *learner's*, *teacher's* and *expert's* perspectives, hence the questionnaires for this entry were tailored to the participants' respective roles. Four participants were involved in this study. Firstly, an assistant vice president of a corporate strategy and planning in a national reinsurer company (*expert perspective*). He has over two decades of experience building high stake collaborations with wholesale providers for reinsurance and retakaful (the Islamic equivalent of conventional reinsurance). Secondly, a language teacher for the English language training programme for diplomats at the university (*language teacher perspective)*. The third participant is a former student of the language training programme who currently works for his country's Ministry of External Relations & Cooperation as one of the official delegates (*learner perspective*). The fourth participant was a second-year student (*learner perspective*) who at the time of this study, was completing his International Relations bachelor's degree.

Apart from the language teacher who is a native speaker for the English language, all respondents for this entry are from developing countries who speak other languages as their first language (L1). Furthermore, with respect to the purpose of ESP learning, both respondents for the *target learner*'s NA were deliberately chosen due to the fact that they both learnt English as their L2 and are expected to use English in their careers.

The questionnaires for the needs analysis included cross-questioning by using data from Planken's negotiation corpus (2005), and examples of negotiation dialogues from Business English textbooks used by the university's students. The questionnaires also employed open-ended questions to provide opportunities for respondents to generate examples and opinions of their own. I also followed up with the respondents after the initial questionnaires have been distributed. Prior to data collection, the questionnaires were checked and approved by an expert on trades language who teaches at the university. As a caveat, Planken's corpus was not built from data of diplomats' negotiations. It was built from her study that investigated how *facework* was used by business professionals and business students in their negotiations, but we can argue that similar to diplomatic goals, business companies need to manage and sustain good rapport with the people in their professional setting in order to attain both transactional and interpersonal goals. Planken's (2005) corpus has been useful in showing the discourse patterns in novice and professional negotiations, however the study was primarily reporting and analysing salient negotiating patterns among professional negotiators versus students of international business communication. The study did not discuss insights from the language teacher who directly delivers the ESP curriculum nor the learners' immediate needs, and cross-checking these insights with the expert/professional in the industry. On one hand, classroom learning needs structure and scaffolding to address students' issues, navigate task completion, and support learners' material consumption. These tasks rest heavily on the classroom practitioners, which points to the need of investigating the teacher's insights about teaching ESP students. On another, the need for relevant genre (Palli & Lehtinen, 2015), linguistic content and pedagogical model (Chan, 2018) in ESP courses should still be pragmatically informed by data from the specific occupational environment. It is due to these reasons that we need to explore how we can use data in NA from various perspectives to better inform classroom materials and delivery. A small-scale case study can still be critical in gaining better insights of what would be useful to include in lessons for public officials and highlighting practical skills in rapport management for negotiations.

Results and Discussions

Language: The use of pronouns in negotiations

The use of pronoun "we" is rated high by the expert, 8 out 10 (10 being the most important). The expert wrote in his response:

> "Professionals tend to use "we" because they are usually aware they represent the interest of their organization, and not their own...We understand that in a professional environment, important decisions are rarely made alone – It is usually a consensus".

The expert also included in his response that knowing how to utilise "we", "us" and "our" when expressing opinions and consensus in negotiations could also project certain credibility because it invokes the impression that the negotiator has discussed the plans with his/her team before coming to the negotiating table. He continued in his response that the use of the inclusive pronoun "we", represents the modern business environment, in which the corporate governance practice requires their team to obtain approval from the board: "In modern business environment, corporate governance practice entails the senior management to obtain the approval from the Board when it comes to major business decisions".

In a similar vein, Planken's corpus also reported that the striking difference between professional and aspiring negotiators is in how *which pronouns were used* during the bargaining phase. Her study revealed that in potentially face-threatening communications such as reframing proposals or giving suggestions, professional negotiators tended to use the inclusive pronoun "we". In contrast, the aspiring negotiators (learners), in similar situations, consistently framed their responses with the direct use of the pronoun "you" or solitary "I" (Planken, 2005).

However, when asked how damaging the use of the direct "you" and solitary "I" is in negotiations, the expert in my NA rated that the use of solitary "I" in particular, is only on the scale of 3 (from a scale of 1-10, 10 being the most damaging). He claimed that for certain circumstances, the use of "I" could help 'soften the blow' of rejection and elicit sympathy from the other party. The show of vulnerability through the use of solitary "I" possibly invites sympathy to neutralise face-threatening situations, by shifting the social focus on the interlocutor getting rejected to the individual who has to deliver the rejection. Interestingly, the inclusive "we" again entered the discussions as a way to navigate possible conflicts, especially when giving credence to a rejection. The following comes from the expert's response:

> "… when we have to take a negative position such as rejecting an initial offer, the using *(sic)* of "I" helps to soften the blow, and also used to elicit sympathy from the party we are negotiating with. However, the use of "I" must be validated with the justification of the organization that we are representing (e.g. "I am sorry, I don't think that will work because my company has made it clear that the highest we can pay for the xyz item is xyz dollar…")".

Although the expert rated the use of the solitary pronoun "I" as less damaging and could even be utilised to mitigate face-threatening rejections ('gaining sympathy'), it appears that the use of inclusive "we" is still an important tool when avoiding potential face-threatening situations or conflicts in negotiations. It also appears that it is useful to signal the decision at the negotiation table as a decision by the 'whole unit'. Looking at how the expert paired the use of "we" with the company's decision, not his own's, points to the use of pronoun-we in certain contexts of negotiation as a way to express a degree of 'avoidance' and 'distancing' from the negative speech act (e.g., rejecting); the decision is not personal.

As for the direct pronoun "you", I asked the expert about how useful its use is in 'vague language', a term used in Business English for delicate negotiations (e.g. To suggest a bigger purchase: *Your order is quite small. If you increase your order, we can give you better prices)*. According to his response, the practicality of vague language is situational. He commented as follows:

> "That depends on the situation. If an urgent and precise action is required, then vague language does not help much as things must be expressed point blank. However, if there is an ample timeframe with more flexibility on the good/service required, vague language may provide more room for further discussions. Overall, I'd rate it at 5".

Talk: Safe Topics in Negotiations

Brown and Levinson (1987) defined safe topics as topics that people typically share common grounds on. We usually choose safe topics in 'small talk' to initiate bond, seek agreement, and ease stress in an exchange. Planken (2005) technically categorised small talk in her study as any talk in the negotiation corpora that is not directly related to the primary transactional goal of a negotiation. This can range from the weather to sports and personal interests. In my NA, both perspectives from the expert and learner mentioned 'talk' in their responses. According to the expert, the ability to have small talk is 'fairly important', especially for the longevity of the business relationship. The following is his response about small talk:

> "…we deal with people who have interests and activities outside their work lives. Establishing a rapport takes more than just conducting plain business transactions especially with those you deal on a long-term basis."

Meanwhile, in the learner's response, one of the learners prefaced his statement with the fact that he generally felt confident participating in negotiation lessons in his training. However, the learner noted that regardless of his confidence in his communication skills, he needed to improve his *intercultural* negotiation skills. The learner's response includes the following:

> "…In addition, I also failed to recognise the reality of cross-cultural negotiation which is significantly driven by different background and that there is no universal value or idea in negotiation and it is highly subjective."

By the same token, in her study, Planken (2005) reported that seven out of nine professional negotiations in her study initiated 'safe talk sequences about the intercultural context' with the other interlocutor/s, namely language difficulties, cultural experiences and cultural comparisons. In contrast, Planken found no instances of safe talk on interculturalness in the student corpus. Comparing the two data, it can be noted that 'safe talk' should be taught in ESP lessons for aspiring negotiators because finding common grounds with the other interlocutor is critical in creating bonds, and it can be achieved with as simple as acknowledging the experiences that you go through as a speaker of other languages. Understandably, aspiring negotiators might avoid talking about experiencing barriers in languages and understanding different cultures in order to appear more professional and capable, yet, data demonstrates that professional negotiators use these common issues to their advantage. The intercultural barriers are also highlighted by the language teacher in my NA. Her response includes:

> "Lack of vocabulary is a key issue which limits their ability to understand others and express their own ideas precisely. Another issue is unfamiliarity with the

> accent and pace of native speaker English so listening and understanding is a problem".

On the surface, the teacher's observations are primarily language-oriented, but she works with adult learners at a higher institution. In spite of the shortcomings she has observed, intelligence and mental capability to learn do not seem to be the barriers. Difficulties to translate meanings to the target language and processing native speakers' accent and speed are problems that non-native speakers face almost exclusively. Unsurprisingly, both learners' responses include similar language issue, primarily highlighting the difficulty to translate ideas to the target language. The following are the responses from the learners' NA:

> "Before, the main problem I faced was vocabulary, but I used to use an electronic dictionary to translate from French".

> "I would add an area that covers the effective communication technique such as the accurate usage of words in negotiating…".

Due to the gradual nature of language learning and various cultural differences, it is safe to say that intercultural issues among ESP students are perennial. The above responses could point not only to a need to include small talk in lessons for negotiations, but also suggest the need to include interculturalness in safe topics when ESP learners are taught how to establish agreeable conversations and build rapport. To date, I have not known any negotiation corpus that includes 'interculturalness' as a category for safe topics.

Pursuing Interaction: Meeting and Negotiation Preparedness
Borrowing from Planken (2002), discourse is used to meet interpersonal goals; interlocutors can attain these goals by establishing and fostering good rapport. Therefore, ESP students and aspiring negotiators have to learn how to continue or 'pursue' interaction when language or intercultural contexts present a problem to their interactional speech. In the NA, the teacher noted that one of the most successful techniques she noticed her ESP students used to improve communication fluency was *being persistent*. The teacher explained it as follows:

> "I think persistence is key. Continuing to pursue interactions even though the communication may be difficult. Over time interaction becomes easier and more fluent… Asking for clarification when communication breaks down".

When learners were asked about what useful strategies they particularly use when having conversations with speakers of other languages, the learner's response included repeating and rephrasing the other interlocutor's idea to make sure that they are on the same page. The learner's NA includes:

> "There were minor issues such as bringing forward my points and idea clearly… One of the most effective techniques that I used was to ensure that I repeat and rephrase the opponents' idea in a different way in order to ensure that we all agreed on the same point"

When analysing the NA, I noted that the learner identified the other party as *opponents,* an issue I will return to later.

Repeating and rephrasing is a skill taught by many language teachers; interlocutor can check their understanding and simultaneously open opportunities for clarification if required. In earlier discussions, one of the issues highlighted is about learners' difficulty to follow native speakers' pace and accent. I do have to point out that on a broader scale, I have reservations about exclusively spotlighting understanding native speakers' accent and pace as the issue. Accent is highly influenced by nationality and one's environment (among other factors), so regardless the other interlocutor is a native or non-native speaker, it is still challenging to understand any accent that we are not familiar with. This is evident in a previous large-scale project investigating professional communication in Hong Kong. In 2014, Warren conducted an extensive survey of over 1,000 professionals across Hong Kong's four main sectors of economy and found that the biggest language problem reported by the participants is *understanding interlocutors with unfamiliar accents*. The survey also recorded *fast speakers* as one of the main problems and they mostly came from the Indian subcontinent, Malaysia, and Singapore – places which have their own mother tongues and L1. This points to the need for ESP language teachers to re-adjust the hegemonic perception that positions native-like speech as the template for learners' competency, since it does not appear to address the actual need in professional settings. On the same note, 'native speaker' issue is not found in any of the expert's or learners' NA, whom as I mentioned earlier, are all second language learners.

Ideally, it is useful to have learners exposed to a variety of accents but in situations where the accent becomes a problem to the communication, learners can be taught that it is fine to employ a multitude of strategies to pursue interactions- such as rephrasing the information that is already adopted by the learners in this study, backchannelling by repetition of the interlocutor's words (Bjorge, 2010), or asking the other person to slow down (Warren, 2014). As strategic use of interpersonal exchange techniques lowers the risk of awkward pauses or miscommunication, it creates positive environment for agreeable interactions.

Additionally, upon closer inspection, it is clear that fluency and the ability to 'organise thoughts in real time' (Warren, 2014) is a consistent issue across the Nas from both the teacher's and learner's perspectives: *but I used to use an electronic dictionary to translate from French* (learner's perspective), *bringing forward my points and ideas clearly* (learner's perspective)*, their ability to understand others and express their own ideas precisely* (teacher's perspective). In a follow-up question, the language teacher emphasised on having a solid preparation leading to the important interaction (e.g. business presentations and meetings). The following is the teacher's response:

> "Preparing for the interaction – practising or rehearsing what is intended to be communicated…In some situations, documentation or PowerPoint could support the worker to communicate ideas more effectively – so the listener is not just dependant on receiving the message through oral language".

The emphasis on preparation corresponds with the expert's NA mentioned earlier, that a company's representative always discusses decisions and plans with their team prior to the actual negotiation. I must note that the expert was mainly addressing decisions directly related to a company's transactional goals but the point notwithstanding, practicing and preparing for the interaction can make all the difference for both interpersonal exchanges and transactional goals.

This circles back to the issue I noted above, the identification of the other interlocutor as 'opponents' in the learner's response. The learner addressed the other party as *opponents* twice in his response (in later question about changes the learner wished to see in their textbook, he responded with "…*emphasize on studying and learning the opponent as a preparation should also be included in the textbook to prepare students to be an effective negotiator).* Conversely, such identification (or labelling) is not found in any of the expert's discourse when addressing 'the other party'. The following are all the 'labels' that the expert use when referring to (potential) business clients and partners in his responses: *we deal with people, especially with those you deal on a long term basis, the audience, the party we are negotiating with.*

If we contrast the two perceptions, we can see that the expert is using the tone of collegiality to address the other party while the learner perceives the other in a more hostile manner (opponents). Furthermore, taking a closer look at the expert's NA, he seems to approach negotiations more flexibly. The following is taken from the expert's response:

> "The negotiator's approach and delivery need to be tailored according to the situation. For example, not every negotiation has to be a win-win, sometimes it just requires one to minimize the loss..."

Throughout my discussions thus far, I have established that tact in language use is a critical skill in preserving face and building rapport in professional negotiations. Members of a work-based community of practice (Wenger, 1999) share among them patterns of accepted speech acts, and I argue that the expert in this study has adopted the common language patterns among negotiators. Although I cannot for certain categorise the learner's perception of the other participants as face threatening, the contrast between the two views indicates the need to include authentic data of perception and communicative repertoires among professionals as part of the ESP training for business negotiations. Facework involves delicate understanding of other interlocutor's sensitivities, therefore perception training is an added value to the programme.

Additionally so, both learners included in their responses the need to add such repertoires in their lessons. The following are taken from the learners' responses:

> "I would add an area that covers the effective communication technique such as the accurate usage of words in negotiating and the preparation towards negotiating such as setting up priorities and providing alternatives".

> "One of the important things in terms of negotiation is communication. I would include in the textbook some successful techniques which can help to make a good advocacy".

In practice, obtaining perception data is often difficult (Spencer-Oatey and Xing, 2003) since discourses occur in contexts and these contexts do not easily transfer from one setting to another. However, it is still valuable to add lessons that encourage these learners to acquire a heightened awareness of creating agreeable environments for interpersonal interactions as they prepare for important meetings -which often works in tandem with successfully attaining transactional goals.

Concluding Remarks

I carried out this study in response to the understudied interactional speech in ESP against the dominating research in professional writing and academic-context English. The main goal of this case study was to analyse professional insights into workplace negotiations, and the learning experiences and expectations in ESP classes to inform future lesson designs for negotiation.

This case study contributes to ESP for negotiation literature by highlighting NA's discussions from various stakeholders in intercultural workplace negotiations. This study found that pronouns can be used to give credence to business decisions at the negotiating table and also employed to mitigate face-threatening rejections. The study also notably extended the discussions of small talks to include interculturalness as a safe topic. Findings in this study also point to the need to train ESP students in meeting preparedness so they can pursue challenging intercultural interactions for rapport building.

ESP programmes are likely to continue to grow, and if we are to offer lasting values to learners, every agent in the learning process- the institution, teachers, and learners, should be engaged in the dynamicity of ESP. ESP should also be gearing more towards increasing our understanding of interpersonal interactions in the workplace by encouraging local engagement among the teacher, learners and field expert. Although the paper builds on existing corpus and studies for negotiations, if we are to increase active involvement from ESP stakeholders to better tailor the curriculum and lesson designs, we need to continue to take up more opportunities aligning learners' needs and classroom learning experiences with authentic data from professional environments.

I also acknowledge the limitations in this study. This case study is limited in nature; only 4 participants were involved for the data collection. Targeted learner's and teacher's perspectives for the study were from the same university so sampling can be subject to bias. The expert's perspective for this study was from a for-profit business background, hence his insights into workplace negotiations may not transfer to other work environment. Despite the limitations, a limited case study like this can collectively contribute to our understanding of interpersonal relationships for professional negotiations and may develop new research in the field.

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