

Gems of English:
Scaffolding students through the transferability challenge
Themes: ESP teaching: pedagogical innovations
ESP practice: multicultural context

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The challenge was to transform one hundred absolute beginners into a sales team that could persuade customers from India, Malaysia and Eastern Europe to buy high-end goods in the world's largest jewelry store in Thailand.

The showroom sales staff were enrolled in a seventy-hour ESP course held over twenty weeks. A regular class and a fast-track class comprising staff regarded by their supervisors as quick learners were formed. The course participants were speakers of Thai, Korean and various Chinese dialects with no common *lingua franca*. The majority were ethnic minorities from various hill tribes in the north of Thailand who had received no formal education.

The original focus of the course was on learning key vocabulary, functional exponents and developing automatic responses through intensive use of drills and mini-dialogues. Workplace observation, a progress test, interviews with supervisors and focus group discussions were used in the mid-course evaluation. During this, it was realized that despite a significant improvement in language knowledge, many participants could not transfer that knowledge to the showroom.

In consultation with the store management, the course was redesigned to provide a strong support framework to scaffold the participants through their respective zones of proximal development in the workplace. A number of novel approaches were adopted, including the harnessing of non-English speaking supervisors in the learning process, creating a buddy and group support network, transforming the workplace into the classroom and using near peer role models.

The course participants' ability to deal with customers was evaluated *in situ* by the floor manager, supervisors, class teacher and secret customers after the course. Although none of the students were able to hold any discussion whatsoever that strayed from patterns taught in the course, this limited lexicon enabled staff to sell to customers who would have otherwise been ignored.