Thesis Title: Designing and evaluating an ESP course: English for Secretaries and Administrative Staff
Field of Study: FF N-SS AJU kombin. [sem 4, cyk 2]
Department: Department of English and American Studies
Author: Mgr. Alžběta Prokešová
Supervisor: Mgr. Linda Nepivodová
Reviewer: Mgr. František Tůma, Ph.D.

Reviewer’s recommendation for overall mark: C

1. Evaluation of central idea, thesis, focus and purpose: B
2. Evaluation of organization, logic and arrangement: B
3. Evaluation of topic development, support and evidence: D
4. Evaluation of language, style, standard usage, citation and bibliographic standards: B

Comments and/or topics and questions for the thesis defence: In her thesis, the candidate introduces the procedure of course design in the context of teaching English for specific purposes. Then she designs a 10-lesson course for secretaries and administrative staff for a private organization. The candidate based her work on 13 sources that she marked as primary and 46 sources that she identified as secondary.

I generally like the fact that the thesis is organized systematically: having introduced teaching English for specific purposes and issues related to course design, the candidate designed a course, within which she conducted interviews with the learners, administered placement and diagnostic tests and taught and evaluated the actual course.

However, the thesis has several weaknesses. One of the problems is that the theoretical part (chapters 1–2) is largely based on the Hutchinson and Waters (1987) book and is rather reproductive, it generally lacks analytic and critical insights. More specifically, section 1.1 is based solely on Hutchinson and Waters (1987) and situates ESP within the context of global changes of the world, while ignoring the development of foreign language teaching. Section 2.3 lacks an acceptable definition of the concept of syllabus and does not introduce the types of syllabi that are commonly mentioned in literature (e.g. Nunan, 1988; Richards & Rodgers, 2014; Wilkins, 1979).

What I find particularly problematic is the presence of aspects of neoliberalism, such as referring to learners as “clients” (p. 35) or including statements such as “all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner’s reason for learning” (p. 19). As the author is enrolled in a programme related to teaching at upper-secondary schools, the reader of the thesis may wonder whether aspects of neoliberal discourse are appropriate in the candidate’s actual field. Again, a more critical perspective would be appreciated, including a comparison with more contemporary sources that problematize such statements (in Czech and Slovak contexts, see, for example, works by Kaščák and Pupala, or translations of the works by Konrad Liessmann). Last but not least, the thesis includes a number of prescriptive and potentially problematic statements. For example, the author holds that “needs analysis must be conducted prior to designing any ESP course” (p. 18). Is this always the case? Is it always realistic and possible? Is it an obligation?

What I like is the fact that the processes of designing and evaluating the course were conducted in a disciplined manner and that the candidate justified the majority of her choices sufficiently. What I miss in the practical part is a clear formulation of the goals and objectives of the course. I would expect them to be formulated on the basis of needs analysis and before the actual evaluation (selection) of textbooks.

Overall, the practical part documents that the candidate prepared, conducted and evaluated an ESP course. The candidate also included detailed lesson plans and teaching materials in the appendix section of the thesis (pp 90–131).
Questions for the thesis defence:

- Can you summarize the goals and objectives of the course that you designed? On the basis of what do you conclude that the goals and objectives were appropriate (pp 61–62)?
- On page 45 you declare that the course builds on Communicative Language Teaching. Can you clarify the theoretical underpinnings of this approach, namely the theory of language and learning? Relatedly, can you explain what the columns in Table 3 (p. 46) stand for? Can you relate the table to syllabus types according to Wilkins (1979)?
- Can you categorize the activities that you list in section 6.1 in the light of Littlewood’s (1991) types of pre-communicative and communicative activities?
- What was the purpose of the initial interview? Why was it administered in English with pre-intermediate learners?
- How (i.e. according to what criteria) were the students’ oral performances in the diagnostic test assessed? What does it mean that a student, for example, got 3 points out of 14 (p. 56)? What do you mean by stating that the students’ “social skills have improved significantly” (p. 57)? How were social skills addressed in the course and how were they measured in the test?
- The course that you designed was prepared in the context of teaching English in a private company. Can you compare this process to the one that you would do within a Czech upper-secondary school as regards the underlying assumptions and steps?

References:

25th May 2017 ...........................................
Mgr. František Tůma, Ph.D.