

Designing teaching materials – necessity or luxury?

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Abstract:

This paper examines designing language teaching materials as an integral segment of language courses taught at tertiary level. Firstly, it defines teaching materials and considers them both as anything that can be used to facilitate the language learning and as authentic materials specially designed for development of specific skills. Secondly, it discusses reasons for designing materials as supplement to the materials teachers are provided with. Thirdly, the authors attempt to present the advantages of the process of producing materials. Material designing enables teachers to have a control over selection of topic, situations, functions and skills to be developed. Moreover, it takes into account particular learning environment, students' learning needs and their learning experiences, cross-cultural issues and their influence on development of students' communication competence.

This is followed by a comparison of experiences in material designing at two faculties, Faculty of Mining, Geology and Petroleum Engineering, University of Zagreb, and Faculty of Technical Sciences, University of Novi Sad. The language teaching material development starts at both faculties with identification of the main requirements set by the departments and the detailed needs analysis of students' needs which is the foundation of all language courses preparing students for using language in working environment. This initial stage helps teachers to select the textbooks and decide on additional material they need. Although material designing contributes greatly to the relevancy and productivity of language courses, it goes together with numerous obstacles ranging from technological to financial ones. To conclude the authors will elaborate on actual examples of materials produced for the courses they teach.

Keywords: language teaching, materials, design, textbooks, development.

1. Introduction

As the globalization of trade and economy intensifies, English for Specific Purposes is becoming ever more popular the world over. However, this increase in awareness regarding the importance of ESP is set against another tradition, that of the 'Use of English' type courses. Also, as ESP teachers, we are all faced with students with different knowledge levels and we are expected to cater to their needs as well. Therefore, contents of a tertiary level English Language course are the subject of some contention.

2. ESP

Since ESP has been around for quite a long time (from the early 1960's), one would expect the ESP community to have a clear idea about what ESP actually should be. But, that isn't so.

Some describe ESP as simply being the teaching of English for any purpose that could be specified. Others, however, describe it more precisely as the teaching of English used in academic studies, or the teaching of English for vocational or professional purposes.

According to Dudley-Evans (1998), ESP can be described as having some absolute and some variable characteristics:

Absolute Characteristics:

1. ESP is defined to meet specific needs of the learners,
2. ESP is centered on the language appropriate to these activities in terms of grammar, lexis, register,
3. ESP uses the underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves.

Variable Characteristics:

1. ESP is usually designed for adult learners,
2. ESP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students,
3. ESP may use a different methodology from that of General English,
4. Most ESP courses assume some basic knowledge of the language systems,
5. ESP may be related to or designed for specific disciplines.

From this, a logical question arises: 'What is the difference between the ESP and 'General English' approach?' Hutchinson et al. (1987:53) answer the question: "in theory nothing, in practice a great deal". At the end of the 20th century, this statement was true and 'General English' teachers recognized that students had a specific purpose for studying English. Still, only rarely would a needs analysis be conducted to find out what was necessary to actually achieve their goals. Today, however, teachers are much more aware of the importance of needs analysis. Also, the quality and content of teaching materials improved dramatically, allowing the teacher to select materials which will best satisfy the needs of the students.

Teaching languages at tertiary level is no simple task for a general English teacher. A great majority of ESP teachers are in no way professionally related to the discipline they teach, so they are first obliged to familiarize themselves with a whole new set of phrases, terms and vocabulary. Many ESP teachers readily accept the available textbooks, which might not suit their purpose fully. If there are no textbooks available for a particular discipline, some ESP teachers decide to use textbooks, which may be unsuitable for their students.

Dudley-Evans describes the roles a true ESP teacher (Swales, 1998) needs to perform. These are:

- 1) ESP Teacher,
- 2) Collaborator,
- 3) Course designer and materials provider,
- 4) Researcher and
- 5) Evaluator.

The first role as 'ESP teacher' is synonymous with that of the 'General English' teacher. In order to meet the specific needs of the learners, the ESP teacher must work closely with field specialists. This collaboration, however, does not have to end at the development stage and can extend as far as team teaching (Johns et al. (1988)).

Both 'General English' and ESP teachers are often required to design courses and provide materials. Hutchinson et al. (1987) support materials that cover a wide range of fields,

arguing that the grammatical structures and strategies of different disciplines are identical. More recent research, however, has shown that this is not so. Many ESP practitioners are therefore left with no alternative than to develop original materials.

The process of materials' design enables teachers to have control over topics selection, functions and skills to be developed. It also takes into account students' learning needs and learning experiences and addresses cross-cultural issues and communication competence.

As far as the disadvantages are concerned, the whole process is time-consuming, mentally and physically taxing and the results are quite uncertain. The materials designing teacher is also at mercy of his/her colleagues and frequently left to his/her own devices.

3. Authentic teaching materials

Most language teachers recognize the value of using authentic materials. There are two major applications of authentic materials: developing learners' language skills and helping learners apply these skills in various activities in the outside world. Since ESP is finally differentiated from the general English teaching, new resources, discipline specific texts and other teaching materials have become necessary. Thus, teachers today are expected to design and develop their own in-house materials that can cater to the specific needs of the students. This is a complicated and complex task although it is, at the same time, interesting, creative and very satisfying.

Teachers are expected to handle many different tasks in the process of creating materials: conduct needs analysis, formulate goals and objectives, find input materials, or create activities. There are different methods of developing new teaching resources. Tomlinson (2003) reports that many of them describe processes which are *ad hoc* and spontaneous and rely on an intuitive feel for activities which are likely to "work".

The process of the development of any EAP course usually starts with the *needs analysis*, defined by Hyland (2006, p. 73) as "the techniques for collecting and assessing information relevant to course design: it is the means of establishing the *how* and *what* of a course". These techniques can involve surveying students about their goals and backgrounds; consulting faculty about course requirements and academic tasks; collecting and analysing students' assignments as well as authentic target texts and so on (Hyland, 2006, p. 78). Learning needs should also be considered when creating materials. The emphasis, to use Hutchinson and Waters's (1987) words, should be on "what the learner needs to do in order to learn". In other words, it is essential that materials writers consider the findings of *learning* research, decide which of its findings are most relevant and applicable to particular contexts, and then develop a set of criteria and use them as a basis for developing context-specific materials. This, according to Tomlinson (2003), can help materials designers clarify their own principles of language learning and teaching and create more effective and efficient materials.

4. Authentic materials in English for specific purposes

Authentic texts have been defined as "...*real-life texts, not written for pedagogic purposes*" (Wallace, 1992). They were written for native speakers and contain "real" language. The sources of authentic materials used in the classroom are infinite, but the most common are newspapers, magazines, movies, songs and literature. One of the most useful is the Internet. Newspapers and any other printed material date very quickly, but the Internet is

continuously updated, more visually stimulating, interactive and promotes a more active approach to reading. One of the main ideas of using authentic materials in the classroom is to “*expose*” the learner to as much real language as possible. It has been said that by taking a text out of its original context, it loses its authenticity:

“As soon as texts, whatever their original purpose, are brought into classrooms for pedagogic purposes they have, arguably, lost authenticity.” (Wallace, 1992)

Even if this is true, the learner is still exposed to real discourse and not the artificial language of course textbooks, which tend not to contain any incidental or improper examples. They also produce a sense of achievement. Extracting real information from a real text in a new/different language can be extremely motivating, therefore increasing students' motivation for learning by exposing them to '*real*' language (Guariento and Morley, 2001). Such texts also reflect the changes in language use, as well as giving the learner the proof that the language is real and not only studied in the classroom:

“Authentic texts can be motivating because they are proof that the language is used for real-life purposes by real people.” (Nuttall 1996:172)

One of the aims of authentic materials is to help the student react in the same way L1 speakers react in their first language (L1). The main advantages of using authentic materials in the classroom therefore include:

- *having a positive effect on student motivation;*
- *giving authentic cultural information;*
- *exposing students to real language;*
- *relating more closely to students' needs;*
- *supporting a more creative approach to teaching.*

The negative aspects of authentic materials are that they can be too culturally biased, often a good knowledge of cultural background is required. Also, many structures are mixed, causing lower levels problems when decoding the texts (Martinez 2002).

The use of authentic materials is recommended at advanced levels and with students dealing with materials from their subject areas (Day & Bamford, 1998; Jordan, 1997; Singhal, 2006). This is because authentic materials relate more closely to students' specific needs, exposing them to “the target language as it is used by the community, which speaks it” (Guariento & Morley, 2001, p. 347).

5. Needs analysis – central for teaching material designing

According to Brindley (1989), needs do not have of themselves an objective reality rather, what is finally established as a “need” is a matter of agreement and judgment not discovery (Lawson, 1979). The needs established for a particular group of students will be an outcome of a needs analysis project and the perspective of the definition of needs. In order to conduct a reliable needs analysis, ‘a triangulation of questionnaires, informal discussions with learners and other lecturers, interviews with ex-students and lecturers, and observation of former students’ actual workplace experiences is conducted before the course’ (Gao, 2007). Learner performance and assignments are appraised during the course and tests results are analyzed after the course. This amalgamation of pre-course, mid-course and post-course analyses helps the teacher understand what the students are like at the start, middle and end of

the course. The combined feedback then serves to inform the teacher as to how the course should be improved or revised.

6. Comparison of experiences

1. Faculty of Mining, Geology and Petroleum Engineering

Coming to the Faculty some 13 years ago, the only textbook that was available to me was from 1972, and although interesting and good at giving basic information about the three professions, it was completely outdated regarding new methods and techniques. In the beginning, I made do with texts I downloaded from the Internet, adapted or paraphrased from various other textbooks, professional articles and other sources. I conducted a sort of needs analysis, going from one teacher to another and interviewing them about the topics they viewed as necessary to be covered by my English class. Getting the materials, which could help in the writing of the textbook, was the next difficult step. Most publishers of professional and scientific papers, which were supposed to form the basis of the textbook, do not allow free access to their databases but charge for the downloading of the papers they publish. Luckily, some of my colleagues were very forthcoming and allowed me to use the materials they themselves purchased. The writing itself lasted for almost a year and when the textbooks were finally completed, I asked several colleagues, experts in their fields, to take a close look at the books and provide feedback. Then the books were tested on two generations of students who provided additional and invaluable feedback. Only then were the books presented to the Faculty's scientific committee for evaluation. The whole process lasted for more than four years.

2. Faculty of Technical Sciences

The Faculty of Technical Sciences in Novi Sad consists of 13 different departments, each deciding individually on the type of the English courses and the number of classes per week. Depending on the department, students may have one to nine semesters of English during their academic studies, which, in itself presents a foreign language teacher with a huge problem when deciding on the amount and content of materials his/her students are going to deal with per semester. Also, the Faculty caters to various scientific fields (power engineering, mechanical engineering, civil engineering, traffic engineering, architecture), all demanding different kinds of topics and materials. Such diversity poses quite a challenge for the teachers of English at the Faculty.

However, one of the main challenges is the question of appropriate textbooks and teaching materials. This is the issue, which has been left to individual teachers to resolve. Different teachers tackle the problem differently - some use what materials are available or what they inherited from the previous teachers, others try to design their own courses and write their own teaching materials and textbooks. Still, the majority combine parts of the existing ESP textbooks with the teaching materials designed for specific groups of students in accordance with the future jobs for which the students are preparing.

7. Conclusion

The design of teaching materials is quite a rewarding, satisfying and enlightening experience but, at the same time a difficult and long-lasting task, demanding in-depth

knowledge of both the English language and the scientific field for which the materials are being designed. It also presupposes the familiarity with basic pedagogical and methodical principles as well as a good deal of patience and interpersonal and “people skills”, since collaboration with colleagues is the key to obtaining valid needs analysis results and materials needed for the writing of the materials. The process itself should follow several pre-determined steps and take into account numerous variables. The materials produced should be examined and checked by experts in the ESP field for which they were designed before they are tested on students to avoid possible mistakes. The next step is to try them out on several generations of students and get their feedback because only such feedback provides the opportunity to make necessary changes and adjustments, leading to better and more appropriate teaching materials.

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