

GREY ISSUES OF ESP MATERIALS FOR ESP INSTRUCTOR

Bhavikaben Mihir Patel*

Abstract

Research on English for Specific Purpose (ESP) has been attracting a great deal of attention in English Language education over the past many decades. It's now widely recognized that most university students, especially in EFL learning context, have limited competence with regard to academic English and later to meet their professional issues related to their language skills. For the same ESP plays essential role and related to the same there is question. Do ESP textbooks really exist? This is central question Johns (1990) addresses. Even today there is no availability for the same. One of the core dilemmas he presents is that "ESP teachers find themselves in a situation where they are expected to produce a course that exactly matches the needs of a group of learners. Further expected to do so with no, or very limited, preparation time." Materials for ESP reflect the specific language needs that are being addressed and have much in common with 'general' ESL/EFL materials, but there are important distinctions as well. Like the field of ESL/EFL in general, ESP has evolved considerably over 50 years, and the impact of this evolution can be seen in the area of materials development. The paper may conclude with insightful logical suggestions for the best practices in identifying and preparing ESP materials.

Key Words

Materials development, English for Specific Purpose (ESP), authenticity, specificity

* Assistant Professor in Communication Skills, Applied Sciences & Humanities Department
A.D. Patel Institute of Technology, New Vidyanagar, Gujarat, India

Introduction

ESP is the abbreviate form of English for Specific Purposes which today is being used by many teachers, expert and instructors. Coffey (1985) noted that “The main consideration in ESP exercise typology must be that of authenticity. All ESP work is in essence a simulation of a real-life task” (p. 84). Simulating real-life tasks in a way that is meaningful and beneficial to ESP students is fraught with challenges. However, simply providing them with examples of real life tasks and texts is sufficient, as ESP students by definition do not have the language skills, the appropriate cultural knowledge, and the expertise (academic, professional, or occupational) necessary to do the tasks or understand the texts. As Widdowson (1997) has observed, what is important is not whether a particular task or text is itself authentic. What is important is whether a learner does tasks or interacts with texts in authentic ways (Roberts & Cooke, 2009). The challenge is to identify, create or modify ESP Materials that are both accessible to learners and help learners to develop the particular expertise they need to be fully functioning performers in the contexts to which they aspire.

The goal of this paper is to highlight issues that ESP teachers in particular need to consider as they evaluate and develop materials. The paper first provides an overview of origin of ESP, particular features and challenges with ESP materials are then discussed, looking specifically at the role of needs assessment and questions about the level of specificity required in ESP materials. The paper concludes with suggestions for ‘best practices’ in identifying and preparing ESP materials.

In defining ESP, Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p.19) posit “ESP is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner’s reason for learning.”

Accordingly ESP can be defined as English instruction based on actual and immediate needs of learners who have to successfully perform real life tasks unrelated to merely passing an English course or exam (Smoak, 1996). So the issue of focusing on learners’ needs becomes equally paramount as the methods utilized to spread linguistic knowledge. Dudley-Evans and st. John (1998) believe that any language must be included as a defining feature of ESP but the main

concerns of ESP are needs analysis, and preparing materials, preparing learners to communicate in an effective way in any required situation.

Origins of ESP

According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987) when the Second World War ended, new scientific, technical and economic demands grew and English became the international language. Therefore, language teachers were pressed to meet the demands of people outside the teaching profession. Then, a dramatic change took place in linguistics, which demanded focus on communicative aspects of language and learners' needs in specific contexts. According to Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) the ESP movement, originated from the massive expansion of scientific, technical and economic activities on an international scale in the 1950s and 1960s and since then ELT community with many more issues regarding ESP.

Theoretical framework on ESP

Farhady (1995) points out that it is necessary to examine the existing ESP materials in order to evaluate their correspondence to a specific model. He suggests that in preparing a textbook, needs-analysis should be conducted, specifications at different levels should be made and appropriate materials should be developed. In my opinion if these not followed carefully the we may not deal with ESP properly. Further I agree with Hutchinson and Waters (1987) who have provided a framework for analyzing students' language needs based in second language (L2) instructions and general evaluation by asking such following question.

1. Defining criteria – on what base will you judge materials?
2. Subjective analysis – what realizations of the criteria do you want in your course? (e.g. who are your learners; what language points should be covered).
3. Objective analysis – how does the material being evaluated realize the criteria? (e.g. who is the material intended for; how is the content organized within the units). Objective analysis in fact, material analyzing.
4. How far does the material match your needs? This can be done impressionistically or by awarding points. (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987, p. 97))

Definitions of ESP

ESP is an approach which has been widely used over many decades. However, as Anthony (1997) notes, there has been considerable recent debate about what it means. At the first Japan Conferences on English for Specific Purposes in 1997 clear differences in how people interpreted the meaning of ESP could be seen (Kimball, 1998). The main speaker at the conference, Gatehouse (2001) was very much aware of the confusion. He set out in his one hour speech to clarify the meaning of ESP. He referred to Strevens' original definition and presented his own revised definition as follows:

Absolute Characteristics

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

Variable Characteristics

1. ESP may be related to or designed for specific disciplines;
2. ESP may use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of General English;
3. ESP is likely to be designed for adult learners, either at a tertiary level institution or in a professional work situation. It could, however, be for learners at secondary school level;
4. ESP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students;
5. Most ESP courses assume some basic knowledge of the language systems.

Wright (1992) says ESP is the study of a particular aspect of language so as to be able to accomplish certain tasks. Smoak (1996) considers ESP as English instruction based on actual and immediate needs of learners who have to successfully perform real-life tasks unrelated to merely passing an English class or exam.

Benefits of ESP

In my opinion ESP courses aim to develop linguistic skills relating to particular spheres of activity not only the nature of the linguistic items introduced, but the ways in which they are introduced and how they are practiced, are highly significant. The first is the matter of learning speed. ESP courses result in a faster acquisition and learning of linguistic items, because the pattern of native speakers' acquisition of language is followed and learned. ESP not only follows this pattern, but provides an opportunity to learn in an accelerated, intensive context.

Second point is the matter of learning speed. ESP courses, the trainees and learners make the maximal use of their learning resources. Obviously the needs analysis is of vital importance here, since it enables trainers and instructors to determine and declare the specific requirements of trainees and ESP learners.

Thirdly, there is learning effectiveness. On an ESP course, the trainees and learners are ready to use language properly and correctly in job-related tasks, tasks which have been identified prior to the course by means of a needs analysis. So, English is usable immediately in the employment context.

Dudley- Evans and st. John (1998) summarize the advantages of ESP in the following four points:

1. Being focused on the learner's need, it wastes no time;
2. It is relevant to the learner;
3. It is successful in imparting learning; and,
4. It is more cost-effective than – General English.

Materials for language instruction

Tomlinson (2011) defines language learning materials as “anything which is used by teachers or learners to facilitate the learning of a language” (p. 2). Most people would recognize “materials” to include textbooks, workbooks, handouts, and even videos, CDs and DVDs. Tomlinson's (2011) definition of materials, however, also includes “newspapers, food packages, photographs, live talks by invited native speakers.... Anything which is deliberately used to increase the learners' knowledge or experience of the language” (p. 2). With the rapid growth of technology

enhanced language learning, as well as the use of technology in academic, occupational, and professional contexts, hardware like Smartphone, tables, and ipads, as well as the “apps” used on them, are also increasingly being used as ‘materials’ in support of language instruction. So too, are social digital media and websites such as Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, and Second Life.

The role of materials in the language classroom is essential; it is hard to conceive how a language class could be taught without materials. In my observation, materials provide most of the input that learners receive in the classroom. In order to be able to create, adapt and use language materials successfully, effective teachers need to be able to create, adapt and use language materials successfully.

Influence of beliefs about language learning on material design

Effective language teaching materials reflect and are shaped by a variety of factors. Probably the most important factors **are the beliefs of the material developers and the teachers who use those materials**. It includes beliefs about how learners learn in general, beliefs about what the appropriate role of teachers and materials are in the learning process etc. Both Graves (2000) and Tomlinson (2011) describe basic principles of second language acquisition that are directly relevant to the development, selection, and use of language materials and activities. It also **reflects belief about how people learn in general and what the teacher’s role should be in using materials**. Some of these principles are presented below.

Characteristics of effective language learning materials based on principles of L2 acquisition.

Learner Affect

- Materials should achieve impact
- Materials should help learners feel at ease
- Materials should take into account that learners differ in affective attitudes
- Materials should help learners to develop confidence
- What is being taught should be perceived by learners as relevant & useful

Learner Engagement

- Materials should require and facilitate learner engagement & self-investment
- Materials should allow students to problem solve, discover, and analyze
- The learner's attention should be drawn to linguistic features of the input
- Materials should provide variety: in roles & groupings, in type & purpose
- Materials should provide the learners with opportunities to use the target language to achieve meaningful communicative purposes

Learner Styles and Preferences

- Materials should take into account that learners differ in learning styles
- Materials should allow students the opportunity to progress at their own rate
- Materials should not rely too much on controlled practices, but allow for creative use of language and learning through trial and error

Learner Needs and Development

- Materials should draw on what students know (their experiences)
- Materials should focus on (authentic) language needs outside of the classroom and expose the learners to language in authentic use
- Learners must be ready to acquire points being presented in the materials
- Materials should take into account that positive effects of instruction are usually delayed
- Materials should help students develop specific skills and strategies

In ESP contexts there is a strong belief that language instruction should focus on discourse and genre structures. Many ESP Teachers will argue that having students analyze discourse structures can help them see how these structures are used to create a coherent and unified stretch of language that performs a specific function. EAP teachers of literature, for example believe that students need to be able to recognize that fiction pieces are often structured around a problem or set of problems that are then resolved.

Materials for specific language learning purposes

As it is observed different types of learners need different types of materials... materials have to follow principles, criteria and procedures which match the distinctive features of the target learners and the environments they are learning in. It is easy to see, for example, that an ESP course for airline Engineers is going to have materials that are very different from the materials used for a business English course. Along with course specialization, Bernard and Zemach (2003) highlight seven additional variables that impact the design and use of ESP materials.

These include:

- Type of Institution (eg. Company program or university)
- Location (e.g., ESL or EFL context)
- Classroom setting (e.g., conference room or classroom)
- Technology (e.g., computers, internet access)

All of these variables should be considered as part of the needs assessment when developing, selecting, and using materials in ESP contexts.

Challenges with ESP materials

There are many challenges for selecting or developing materials to use for specific language purposes. **One challenge is to identify topics that students need, want, and are ready to learn**, and which take into account the knowledge and experiences they already have, while recognizing and developing their limited English skills as necessarily meaning their knowledge about their field, or their intelligence, is limited since second language ability does not reflect intelligence or ability in the specific occupational, professional or educational context. ESP materials need to be at both the appropriate language and intellectual levels of the students.

Another challenge with ESP materials, as noted in the introduction to this paper, has to do with ‘authenticity’. Some have argued that language material should be as authentic as possible. As Graves (2000) notes, “using authentic material is problematic in the L2 classroom because it is not constructed to contain only the aspects of language the learner has encountered or learned up until that point and so may not be entirely accessible to the learner” (p. 156). Graves goes on to argue that pedagogically prepared material is often necessary to provide the

'stepping stones' to understand and use authentic material in real-world contexts. I personally believe that it's not that much necessary to prepared it as by pedagogically. Let it be as authentic as it is and let learner try their best to relate it with their needs instead spoon feeding.

Indeed, a **major challenge for many ESP teachers is that they are often expected to deal with specialized areas of knowledge in which they have not been trained**; for example, most teachers who teach medical or legal English are not themselves trained doctors or lawyers. This adds to the meaningful language materials that are both appropriate for language level and relevant to the learning context. Good ESP teachers successfully address this challenge with a thorough needs assessment that includes the analysis of the language typically used in these contexts, as well as by involving content specialists (through cooperation, collaboration, or team teaching) in the design of language learning materials for specific purposes.

Principles for selecting and creating ESP materials

The question, "ESP textbook: Do they really exist?" Point is that materials appropriately targeted at meeting the specific needs of students in ESP contexts would not be marketable to a broader audience. Harwood (2005) more recently lamented that the "unsoundness of most (EAP) textbooks outweighs many, if not all, of the benefits textbooks can confer" (p. 185). It is essential that ESP teachers be good material developers and adapters, able to provide materials that meet the specific needs of student but fear that many ESP teachers are not particularly strong in this aspect of language instruction. Accordingly, ESP practitioners need to be able to do the following with materials:

- Select appropriately from what is available
- Be creative with what is available
- Modify activities to suit learner's needs
- Supplement by providing extra activities

To assist in this process, Barnard and Zemach (2003) offer a "recommended sequence" for the preparation of language learning materials for specific purposes, as following:

- Determine the needs and preferences of the students and institutions

- Determine what sort of language contexts the course will focus on (e.g., lectures, business, meeting)
- Decide how to present the language in the course (e.g., topic, function, situation, grammar)
- Determine what language skills and sub-skills to focus on, based on needs analysis, determine the types of activities that will be used in the course (e.g., individual, pair, group, whole class)
- Decide on material design
- Prepare materials
- Pilot the materials ; collect and collect feedback
- Revise the materials based on classroom experience and feedback

Unfortunately, the more ‘specific’ and targeted the language teaching context is, less likely to published materials that are appropriate for the ESP class, especially compiled into one textbook, since textbook authors and publishers write material and activities designed for broad, general audiences. **The result is that ESP teachers either have to create or adapt much of the material they use.** Since creating materials from scratch is very challenging and time consuming, most teachers become skilled at adapting materials originally designed for other purposes. Several options that teachers have when they want to adapt published materials for their particular teaching contexts include the following:

- Deleting material that is inappropriate, irrelevant, etc.
- Adding material or activities to better target language expectations of the ESP context
- Reducing or simplifying material or activities to make them more appropriate or less difficult or to give them less emphasis
- Modifying materials or activities to make them more demanding or accessible to students. This can include
 - ✓ Extending activities to emphasize the lesson focus
 - ✓ Replacing texts or activities with more suitable material
 - ✓ Branching- providing options to students for working through existing readings or activities
 - ✓ Reorganizing material to better fit teaching context or course goals

An excellent point of departure of novice ESP material and curriculum developers is with lists of ESL Publishers which have been made publically available on-line.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the origins of ESP, key notions about ESP and examined issues in ESP material. These issues have been supported by current and pertinent academic literature. It is my sincerest hope that these observations will provide insight into the challenges facing the ESL instructor acting as ESP material developer. ESP teachers can draw wide variety of published materials for their classes, it is essential that they know how to identify, adapt and develop materials to address the specific language needs they identified for their students. This has sought to high light key issues in materials development that ESP teachers need to be aware of, including how beliefs about language learning influence material design, the various roles that materials play in language learning influence material design, the various role that materials play in language instruction, the particular challenges inherent in selecting or developing ESP materials and important points of debate in ESP materials design. The hope is that this may serve as a meaningful and principled reference for those who are seeking to improve their selection and development of materials in ESP context.

References

- [1] Dudley-Evans, T., and St John, M. (1998). *Developments in ESP: A multi-disciplinary approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [2] Hutchinson, T. and A. Waters (1987). *English for Specific Purposes: A Learning-centred approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [3] Jones, G. (1990). ESP textbooks: Do they really exist? *English for Specific Purposes*, 9, 89-93.
- [4] Yogman, J., & Kalyani, C. (1996). ESP program design for mixed level students. *English for Specific Purposes*, 15, 311-24.
- [5] Lomperis, A. (1998). Best practices in EOP/EPP: Steps in providing a programme. <http://my.voyager.net/azure/program I.html> Retrived May 8, 2001, from the World Wide Web.