



DEVELOPING TEACHING MATERIALS FOR ESP COURSES: THE LAST OPTION MANY ESP TEACHERS RESORT TO

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Abstract

Contrary to the claim made by Hutchinson and Waters (1987) that designing teaching materials should be the last option considered, Basturkmen and Bocanegra-Valle (2018) remind that many ESP teachers are very frequently directly involved in designing teaching materials as commercially published coursebooks and other materials tend not to be relevant to the needs of their specialized groups of learners.

This paper offers an insight into the key aspects as well as the sequence of ESP materials design. It outlines the main beliefs and principles which constitute the general framework for teaching materials development and

summarizes the major explicit and implicit teachers' beliefs which inevitably reflect on the process of materials design. This paper also tackles the issues of assumed abilities and training for developing and/or adapting teaching materials offered to ESP teachers in the attempt to answer the everlasting question whether being a good ESP teacher automatically implies being a good materials designer.

Keywords: *ESP, tailor-made materials, ESP teachers as materials developers, aspects and sequence of materials developments.*

Introduction

Materials development is a typical feature of ESP courses mainly because of the attempt to offer teaching materials which fit specific subject area and specific needs of a certain group of students. Coursebooks tailored to the needs of a specific group of students are not likely to be available since publishers are understandably reluctant to produce materials for limited markets. There are cases when suitable materials are available on the market but they are not easy or affordable to buy. Another reason for writing ESP teaching materials is simply enhancing the reputation of an institution or a teacher as a visible and tangible product of activity. The majority of commercially published teaching materials available on today's market are written by competent and experienced professional writers based on market needs analysis conducted by publishers. Although these coursebooks are systematic, thorough, well-designed and easy to use, yet many of them lack the energy and imagination required to be considered appealing and relevant.

Basturkmen and Bocanegra-Valle (2018) remind that many ESP teachers are frequently directly involved in designing teaching materials as published coursebooks and other materials tend not to be relevant to the specific needs of their specialised groups of learners. However, studies of how ESP teachers develop such materials have been scarce.

Materials developed locally by a particular teacher or group of teachers for a particular course, a particular group of students and with the resources available at a particular time are referred to as *in-house materials*, *tailor-made materials*, *locally produced materials*, *self-designed materials*, *internal materials*, *home-made materials* or *home-grown materials*. These materials may be developed either from scratch or by adapting existing learning and authentic materials.

As part of the materials development process, first of all, available materials are reviewed, evaluated and selected according to different criteria and with reference to a particular ESP course. Then, if there is a lack of materials, or if materials available are not suitable according to the specific criteria for evaluation, teachers might be required to develop materials from scratch or abridge, extend, refine, rewrite – in short, adapt – the available materials for a particular learning situation, ESP area, target group of learners, timing or set of resources. There is also the possibility that, although there are materials available for classroom use, practitioners feel the need to provide additional materials for out-of-classroom work or self-study. In this case, the process would not differ.

Due to the fact that materials development is an ongoing process, those engaged in creating or adapting materials will be required to pilot test or perform evaluative reviews so as to adjust materials over time in

response to implementation outcomes, current trends in the field or research findings. This last step is a desirable practice because “materials that undergo this evaluative review and revision process are likely to serve student and teacher audiences more effectively than materials that do not.” (Stoller et al., 2006, p.175).

Key aspects in ESP materials design

According to Tomlinson (1998), the following main beliefs and principles outline the basic framework for materials development:

- a) materials writing is most effective when is it based on thorough understanding of the needs of a particular group of students i.e. their specific language difficulties, learning objectives, preferred learning styles. A process of materials writing which takes into consideration all these variables is learner-centered. Teaching contexts vary in that sometimes teachers are expected to rigidly follow a prescribed book; in some cases teachers struggle with finding time for writing their own materials, but in general the number of teachers who never adapt or modify and supplement the core teaching materials is low;
- b) teachers know and understand their students best. By becoming sensitive and responsive to their students’ needs, objectives, difficulties and preferred learning styles teachers simultaneously become materials writers and researchers;
- c) teachers need a grounding i.e. basic knowledge or training in materials writing. Learning how to effectively write teaching materials should be an inseparable part of every teacher’s training

process. The process of writing materials in fact teaches one to develop criteria for evaluating materials produced by others. By learning to create materials teachers reduce their dependency on published materials and develop professionally;

- d) all teachers teach themselves – when no choice is provided, there are cases when teachers have to teach against the grain. Producing effective materials minimizes the chances of teachers being forced to teach using a methodology that contradicts their personal teaching philosophy;
- e) trialling and evaluation are vital to the success of any materials. Since learners are users of the materials their opinion is very important and their feedback should always be welcomed. This is easy to implement in practice when the teacher uses his/her own materials whereas with printed materials usually there are trials in which teachers rather than learners provide the feedback.

With reference to materials development in ESP courses, Bocanegra-Valle (2010) reminds that materials are particularly useful in ESP because of their key role in exposing students to the language of a particular discipline as it is actually used or in short, as Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) put it, they are a source of “real language”. Developing materials for the ESP classroom is balancing among learning needs, language content and subject-matter content which implies considering a number of issues:

- the target topic or the carrier content;
- the relevance of the topic to the specific group of students;

- the ESP teacher's knowledge about the carrier content;
- the students expected knowledge about the carrier content;
- the extent to which materials reflect the language/conventions of the discipline;
- the learning goals;
- the target language form/function/skill;
- available, suitable and accessible materials;
- required and available teaching equipment;
- the time that should be spent on the design, development and implementation of activities;
- whether materials should be classroom-oriented or provide additional out-of-classroom work.

Apart from selection of appropriate language, responding to the needs and interests of the students and applying effective learning strategies, Barnard and Zemach (2003) also suggest paying special attention to the following aspects when preparing ESP materials:

- background, experience and knowledge about the ESP specialty of the teachers who would be using them;
- developing the teaching materials according to guidelines which have been indicated in the course syllabus;
- ensuring that materials allow for personal preference and modification by the teacher;
- providing guidelines and templates to aid less experienced teachers to use and develop materials;
- ideally, designing materials so as to allow for partial changes to be made.

Furthermore, in the process of ESP materials development the teachers as materials developers, according to Barnard and Zemach (2003), should always bear the following in mind:

- the more focused the course, the greater the knowledge of the specialism required by the teacher;
- the students will very often know more about the topic area than the teacher;
- greater specialization will automatically result in more differences in the course content, however, all areas of ESP share a common basis in general English;
- theoretically speaking, in an ESP course it is easier to predict students' specific language needs;
- a course especially developed for a specific context and group of learners will not necessarily be limited to the language used in that context. Depending on the time available, unrelated English for General Purposes content can be used to develop fluency and provide variety.
- the proficiency level of students may limit the level of specificity of a course. At lower levels, more attention will probably be given to proficiency in general English.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) list the following main principles than need to be observed in materials writing:

- materials should provide a stimulus to learning since: “good materials do not teach: they encourage learners to learn.” (p.107) As a result good materials should “contain interesting texts; enjoyable activities which engage the learners' thinking capacities; opportunities for learners to use their existing knowledge and skills; content which both learners and teacher can cope with.” (p.107)

- materials should offer a clear and coherent unit structure which helps to organize the learning/teaching process by assisting teachers in planning the lessons and offer students a sense of progression. When fulfilling this role, materials should be clear and systematic, however, they should not be too inflexible so as not to allow flexibility, variety and creativity;
- materials should reflect the view of language and language learning held by the author;
- materials should be able to introduce teachers to new teaching techniques and thus broaden teacher training;
- materials should represent models of correct and appropriate language use which is their necessary function, however, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) warn that “it is all too often taken as the only purpose, with the result that materials become simply a statement of language *use* rather than a vehicle for language *learning*.” (p.108).

Sequence of ESP materials production

According to the most common ESP course scenario, in case of available teaching materials, those materials are evaluated and if considered suitable for the specific ESP course, they are selected, implemented and afterwards reviewed. However, in case the materials are not available or not suitable for a certain ESP course, new teaching materials are developed either from scratch or from authentic texts. Alternatively, authentic materials or materials published for other ESP areas are adapted. Finally these, newly created or adapted materials are implemented, piloted and reviewed.

Tomlinson (1998, p.97) summarizes the process of materials writing in the following five-step sequence:

- “*identification* of a need to fulfill or a problem to solve by the creation of materials;
- *exploration* of the area of need/problem in terms of what language, what meanings, what functions, what skills, etc.?”;
- *contextual realization* of the proposed new materials by the finding of suitable ideas, contexts or texts with which to work;
- *pedagogical realization* of materials by the finding of appropriate exercises and activities and the writing of appropriate instructions for use;
- *physical production* of materials, involving consideration of layout, type, size, visuals, reproduction, tape length, etc.

When writing materials most teachers move in this direction, i.e. starting from identification of a need for materials to their eventual use in the classroom. Tomlinson (1998) notes that this linear direction might be one of the reasons for materials failing to achieve an aim and highlights that what makes the process dynamic is adding another stage beyond the classroom use, the stage of evaluation of materials used in order to examine whether the objectives were met. The evaluation of teaching materials does not necessarily need to be conducted exclusively by students. It can be performed by fellow teachers, for instance. Apart from evaluation as one of the essential components of materials writing, when searching for possible solutions for an identified problem the human brain does not work in a linear fashion. In the process from identifying a problem, producing and using materials, there are many optional pathways and feedback loops.

The study on teachers' beliefs and practices of teaching and designing materials for ESP courses conducted by Basturkmen and Bocanegra-Valle (2018) revealed that most of the materials developed by the teachers who participated in the research were focused on vocabulary related to the disciplinary or work-related area of the students. When describing the materials development processes, many ESP teachers recalled going through the following stages:

- (1) identifying suitable source materials,
- (2) deciding how to use authentic texts, and
- (3) thinking of real-world tasks.

The study did not attempt to identify all the materials design processes that the teachers went through. It attempted, however, to understand the processes the teachers themselves highlighted as significant i.e. the processes the teachers themselves chose to present.

The major conclusions drawn from this study could be summarised as:

- specialist vocabulary, authentic materials and tasks turn out to be the biggest challenge even for experienced ESP teachers so they should be targeted in teacher professional development,
- predominant view is that ESP teaching could usefully introduce some subject content alongside language content and that learner factors (i.e. affective factors) are of major importance in ESP teaching;
- obvious absence of concern for grammar and discourse features in language use in the specialist domains was also noted by the researchers.

Barnard and Zemach (2003) recommend the following sequence for preparing ESP teaching materials

- determining the needs and preferences of the students through questionnaires and/or interviews;
- deciding on the language contexts the course will focus on (e.g., lectures, business meetings);
- deciding on the categories for presenting the language in the course (e.g. grammar, function, lexis, situation, topic, communicative skill);
- deciding what language skills and sub-skills the course will focus on (e.g. listening, speaking, reading, writing) taking into account learners' objectives;
- designing the syllabus and deciding if it is going to be cumulative, or each unit/lesson will be independent;
- determining the types of activities that will be used in the course (e.g. individual, pair, group, whole class);
- deciding on the page layout of worksheets and preparing templates;
- preparing the materials;
- piloting the materials; collecting and collating feedback through questionnaires and interviews;
- revising the materials;
- using the materials;
- getting feedback from students, teachers and sponsors during and after the course through questionnaires, interviews, classroom observations, videotaping of lessons, lesson comment sheets, etc.;

- revising the materials if necessary;
- reviewing the course periodically.

In many cases, some of the suggested steps will be omitted, however, the process suggested is circular.

According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987) materials design should start by determining their purpose or asking the question what the materials are supposed to do. The model for ESP materials design they offer consists of four elements: input, content, language and task.

The *input* can be any piece of communication data (text, video, dialogue, etc.) relevant to the needs identified which provides stimulus material for activities; new language items; correct models of language use; topic of communication; opportunities for learners to use their information processing skills and their existing knowledge of language and subject matter.

The *content* focus reminds that language should not be considered as an end in itself but as a means of conveying information. The non-linguistic content should generate communication in the classroom.

The *language focus* gives students a chance to take the language apart, study it carefully and put it back together. The aim is to enable students to use the foreign language they are learning in communicative tasks for which they have the necessary language knowledge.

The *task* should be communicative and give students a chance to use the content and language knowledge they have built up. As was already

mentioned, “the ultimate purpose of language learning is language use.” (p.109).

The primary focus of this model is on the communicative task. The content and language are drawn from the input based on what the students need to do to complete the task.

ESP teachers as materials writers

Basturkmen and Bocanegra-Valle (2018) point out the fact that apart from teaching, ESP teachers assume a range of other teaching related roles. Investigating learners’ needs and the specialist discourse they need to acquire turns ESP teachers into researchers. Moreover, they are often involved in developing authentic, in-house, tailored-made teaching materials and also act as content-knowledgeable instructors.

The ideas and beliefs regarding the language teaching and learning process held by teachers inevitably reflect on the decisions made in the teaching materials development process. Teachers’ beliefs, grounded partially on personal experience with teaching and learning and partially based on theoretical ideas developed from relevant literature, official training, conferences and professional development workshops attended, can be explicit (i.e. beliefs teachers are aware of and can openly discuss) or implicit (i.e. beliefs teachers are unaware of and consequently cannot publicly express, but can easily be noticed in the teaching practice). The explicit beliefs, convictions and principles reflect on deciding what to include and what to exclude from the materials so as to target identified students’ needs; using or refraining from authentic texts and tasks; teaching or avoiding language learning strategies; adapting teaching to

the actual overall linguistic knowledge of the students or ignoring the actual proficiency level of students; informing students about the aims and objectives of each lesson or withholdign such details from students.

As far as the implicit convictions, beliefs and principles of ESP teachers are concerned, or more precisely the very ideas regarding the process of teaching and learning on which the daily teaching practice is based, relevant literature suggests that when deciding to develop teaching materials majority of ESP teachers highlight the need to create materials which:

- enable students to demonstrate their mastery of the specific content knowledge using the English language simply as s medium;
- enable incidental learning from the specialist area alongside increasing the overall target language proficiency level;
- assisting students in perceiving where and how the technical vocabulary learnt in class can be used;
- create opportunities for students to actually use the language learnt to discuss issues they are “experts” about; and
- are motivating for the students.

Unlike Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) who consider that just a few of the good ESP teachers are also good ESP materials writers, Tomlinson (2003) notices that teachers all over the world need just a short training, some experience and support in order to become materials writers who create imaginative and appealing materials relevant to students’ needs. He highlights that in general the processes of teaching materials evaluation, adaptation and production are slightly neglected in the teacher training process.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987), on the other hand, remind that materials writing is a fact of life for many teachers and warn that materials created by teachers for the students at a particular institution is in fact an abuse of teachers since it is assumed that if one can teach she/he can also write materials without any prior training in the techniques and skills of materials writing.

In Barnard and Zemach's (2003) view a good material writer should primarily be a good teacher and possess the following:

- linguistic knowledge of the target language;
- general teaching experience;
- teaching experience in the relevant specialism;
- some degree of knowledge of the relevant specialism;
- an interest in the relevant specialism;
- familiarity with learning materials available for the specialism;
- experience of writing general English materials;
- an interest in the learning/teaching process;
- the ability to work with others;
- the ability to assess the clarity and effectiveness of materials and respond appropriately.

Barnard and Zemach (2003) also consider it vital for ESP teachers to continuously interact with teachers teaching other courses in order to gain an insight into the requirements imposed on students attending those courses. This is probably the most convenient way to ensure compliance between the ESP course objectives and students' real needs.

Conclusion

The preparatory stages of the process of materials development would include assessment of students' needs and priorities, identification of language elements and pedagogical approaches, selection of activities to be used, piloting and/or evaluating the draft version. In reality, hardly any teacher would start at the very beginning due to time restraints and the effort required. Consequently, in most cases the existing resources and ideas are adapted. Fortunately, the internet offers ESP teachers a plethora of ideas and resources to start from.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) list a number of reasons why materials writing should be considered as the last resort. The first thing to determine is if the students' needs are really significantly different from those of previous groups of students. In most cases existing materials can be reused but it should be born in mind that many students feel they get their money's worth only when they work with tailor-made materials. In cases where a new set of teaching materials should be used, the pool of existing, already published coursebooks should be evaluated and selected from. Existing materials can be used as they are or adapted by additional exercises or changing the text. The last thing suggested to be done in order to avoid writing materials is to reduce the area of the course that really requires new materials.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) offer some useful hints to the ones who after all decide to write their own materials. They suggest that there is no need for the wheel to be re-invented or in other words existing materials should be used as a source of ideas. Perfection should not be aimed at in the first draft, on contrary the materials should be tried out, revised,

expanded and improved. Enough time should be devoted to materials design as it can be very time-consuming. Last but not least, appearance of materials should be paid attention to as boring looking materials will inevitably be treated as such.

Developing teaching materials is inevitably a process of trial and error. Unlike professional coursebook writers who probably have in mind only the type of materials they would like to use with a particular group of students, ESP teachers actually teach in a particular situation with a certain group of students which should make their task of writing materials a lot easier. However, it is more than convenient to bear in mind that materials which are appropriate for a particular ESP course may not prove so efficient for other similar ESP courses.

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