Developing ESP study materials for students at a non-philological faculty

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Abstract

Nowadays, thanks to internationalization and globalization, university students have an opportunity to study abroad. This is also true for engineering students of the Faculty of Informatics and Management (FIM) of the University of Hradec Kralove, Czech Republic. In order to help them succeed in their foreign studies, teachers of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) try to meet their language needs. Although there exist a number of different ESP textbooks, most of these textbooks, however, due to the complexity of topics and grammar structures, cannot meet specific needs of these students. Therefore the purpose of this article is to discuss some of the issues of ESP materials development. These include methodological principles and approaches to the ESP materials development and ESP materials production.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes; materials development; materials production; approaches

1. Introduction

Nowadays, thanks to internationalization and globalization, university students in particular have an opportunity to study abroad. This is also true for students of the Faculty of Informatics and Management (FIM) of the University of Hradec Kralove, Czech Republic. On average, 60 FIM students of computer science, financial management and management of tourism go and study within the ERASMUS (EuRopean Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students) project at a partner university abroad. In order to help them succeed in their foreign studies, teachers of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) try to meet their language needs. In fact, identifying their specific language needs is a basic characteristic which distinguishes ESP from general English teaching (Hutchinson

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As Robinson (1989) adds, ESP first arose, and has continued to develop, in response to a need; the need of non-native speakers of the language to use it for some clearly defined practical purpose.

As Frydrychova Klimova’s (2013) research shows, ESP teachers of these non-native speaking (NNS) ERASMUS students should pay attention to the following issues:

- development of formal writing skills;
- development of listening skills focused on listening to different native speakers accents;
- enhancement of students’ discipline-specific vocabulary; and
- development of students’ general English to prepare them for everyday life.

Although there exist a number of different ESP textbooks, most of these textbooks, however, due to the complexity of topics and grammar structures, cannot meet specific needs of these students. Therefore ESP teachers attempt to develop their own study materials which would cover the issues above mentioned. Thus, the purpose of this article is to explore some of the issues of materials development which seem to be important in this process.

2. Basic approaches and principles to the ESP materials development

In the development of study materials, ESP teachers should bear in mind specific characteristics of their students, which are as follows:

- ESP students use English to fulfil their discipline-specific needs;
- the use of authentic materials is much more widespread in TESP than ELT because authentic materials can show students how real-world tasks are understood and approached in their subject disciplines;
- ESP students have greater opportunities to use technologies than other students of English since ESP is at the forefront of using technologies for language teaching (cf. Todd, 2003); in particular, technical universities and faculties play an important role in the implementation of ICT in the teaching of foreign languages (see Simonova, 2010); and
- team-teaching is a distinctive principle of TESP (Todd, 2003), but not of other ELT situations.

Furthermore, on the basis of evaluation of contemporary research, available literature and personal experience, Frydrychova Klimova (2013) identified the following key methodological principles and approaches in TESP:

- promoting constructivism and connectivism as background philosophies (cf. Jonassen, 1994; McMahon, 1997; Siemens, 2004; Vygotsky, 1978; or Wilson & Cole, 1991);
- exploiting corpus linguistics as a resource for the teaching of specific genres (cf. Barlow, 2002);
- using task-based activities (cf. Herbolich, 1979);
- exploiting authentic materials and tasks (cf. Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998);
- promoting learner autonomy (cf. Todd, 2003; Waters & Waters, 1992; 1993);
- using blended learning (cf. Frydrychova Klimova, 2012);
- integrating cooperative and collaborative learning; and
- employing team teaching (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998).

Probably one of the most arguable approaches in TESP is the use of authentic materials. In TESP there has always been a tendency towards prioritising authentic texts such as the use of case studies in TESP for business, law, medicine and engineering (cf. Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998). At the same time, it should be noted that there are some pedagogical situations where authors, such as Jordan (1997) or Ellis (1999, as cited in Hyland, 2006), think that non-authentic/contrived materials better serve pedagogical purposes. According to Ellis (ibid.), contrived texts can enrich students’ input with more examples of the target structure, while authentic texts can provide meaningful exposure to the language such as in case of the exploitation of corpus linguistics.

It is also worth mentioning that ESP students do not always find using authentic, discipline-specific materials in ESP classes attractive since they say that they are having to read these kinds of texts all the time in their subject classes and they would rather prefer other authentic materials while learning ESP (cf. Plews, 2010). A solution is videos of authentic materials from the Deutsche Welle website exploited by Frydrychova Klimova & Kacetl (2012) in their ESP classes. In each lesson students are exposed to current topics from various fields (e.g. politics, sports, environment, or culture). Using these as a springboard, they run discussions and do various tasks. Moreover, such materials link students with the outside world and thus they are more involved in their learning.
3. Materials production

Besides the employment of the above mentioned principles and approaches, the ESP teachers should pay careful attention to the clarity, conciseness and explicitness of the study materials structure. Moreover, learning materials should be an intellectual challenge. This issue is highly topical nowadays since many of these study materials, and particularly for the ESP students, are also used online and students can use them for their self-study as well. As recent research has shown (cf. Frydrychova Klimova & Poulova, 2013), the online study materials should be as follows:

- Study materials should have a clear, concise, logical and simple structure (information in bullets is preferred).
- They should be well-balanced (i.e. there should be an adequate amount of relevant teaching matter including learning objectives and exercises/assignments/self-tests).
- The materials should be comprehensible and up-to-date.
- They should be easily navigated.
- They should be interactive with appropriate multimedia components.
- They should be linked to other suitable materials and relevant websites.

In addition, Frydrychova Klimova (2012) provides the following simple framework for the creation of any topic-based study materials, be they online or traditional, i.e. textbooks:

Maximally a two page document consisting of the following items should be developed (see Fig. 1 below):

- topic (a concise sentence or a phrase of the lesson content);
- learning goal (a short statement motivating the participants to study the particular lesson); prerequisites (previous knowledge required to master the lesson);
- skills (a description of the knowledge/skills to be gained in the particular lesson);
- explanation of the basic concept and ideas of the teaching matter discussed in the lesson (in the form of text and questions);
- conclusion with self-tests, tasks, quizzes (with keys), or an assignment; and
- bibliographical sources and or links to them.

Fig. 1. A structure of an ESP lesson and its content
Furthermore, the author of this paper suggests following Jolly & Bolitho’s (2011) dynamic approach to materials production and adaptation saying that teachers should trial their materials with their classes and then modify them according students’ feedback and suggestions.

Finally, before using the study materials, be it online or traditional, teachers should explicitly explain to their learners how to use these materials. Therefore a kind of a study guide is highly recommended. In fact, this study guide can help students increase their chances of passing their ESP course successfully and effectively. This guide can serve as an introduction and motivation into the subject. Moreover, it can provide information about the subject; its goal, instruction how to study, or links to other sources.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that materials developers, who are in most cases also teachers, should reflect not only methodological principles and approaches, but consider that materials need to be written in such a way that the teacher can make use of them as a resource and not have to follow them as a script (cf. Tomlinson, 2010). If such a material is developed, then both teaching and learning is a challenge. Moreover, such written educational materials might increase student’s interest in studies, respectively his/her motivation for self-study (Frydrychova Klimova & Poulova, 2013).

References


