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SELECTING MATERIALS FOR ESP CLASSES

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Abstract

The purpose of the present paper is to analyse important aspects related to ESP materials selection and design and to prove that the success of ESP classes is closely connected with the teacher's ability to choose materials which are in perfect accordance with the learners' needs and aims. Resorting to ready-made courses may look much easier than coming up with new materials because it is less time consuming and it allows teachers to focus on teaching content, not on creating it. However, the use of published coursebooks involves a lot of disadvantages, such as the difficulty of finding materials which perfectly meet the learners' needs. Additional materials and adaptations are often required in order to make the course successful.

A very important question when considering the choice of coursebooks for ESP learners is whether they should contain authentic or non-authentic materials. Should they contain language which comes from the real world or language which has been adapted to focus on particular lexis and structures? The former may seem more attractive and natural while the latter may prove to be more efficient especially when time is short.

The paper also aims to prove that it is vital for books to provide learners with materials that are as close as possible to their professional world.

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1. Introduction

The present paper aims to analyze key aspects of ESP materials selection and design. Materials play a vital role in teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and materials writing may be seen as a very important aspect of ESP practice. The purpose of the paper is to show how important it is to select appropriate materials for students' needs and to adapt them to the specific needs and expectations of each



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and every student. It also highlights the importance of resorting to authentic materials which are able to reproduce the real world in the artificial environment of the classroom.

The paper provides a close analysis of the criteria which ESP teachers must have in mind when selecting their teaching materials. It highlights the necessity of selecting them in perfect accordance with the students' needs, their skills as well as their preferences. It takes into account both advantages and disadvantages of resorting to ready-made courses and tailored materials, showing that resorting solely to one sort of materials to the detriment of the other is not the best option. A review of the literature on the topic of materials selection for ESP classes represented the starting point of the present paper. An analysis of the impact of introducing different kinds of materials to ESP students, especially to students training to become mechanical engineers, shows students' different reactions to ESP materials.

One of the most important contributions of the paper to the approach to selecting materials for ESP classes was the recognition that there are no absolute criteria ESP teachers can rely on when they select teaching/learning materials and when they have to decide whether to use ready-made materials or tailored materials, authentic or non-authentic texts. The best option is to select from the existing printed coursebooks and to resort to writing materials only when the materials on the market do not manage to meet the students' needs.

As Hutchinson and Waters point out, "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" (1987:19). A short review of the literature on the topic of materials selection for ESP classes reveals interesting yet conflicting points of view. According to Gilmore (2007:109), the ESP teacher must be able to find authentic texts suitable for the students' different needs. Mishan (2005:40) shows that elementary ESP students possess background knowledge which allows them to understand texts which even native speakers might find inaccessible. On the other hand, most ESP students show much more interest in the topic of a text than in the form of language.

The topic of materials selection and whether these materials should be authentic or non-authentic has been widely questioned in the ESP literature. A close analysis of ESP professionals' views reveals the importance of choosing appropriate materials for students' needs and of adapting them to the specific needs of each individual. A review of the different opinions of experienced authors and their arguments for and against using authentic materials in ESP classes shows modern teachers' preference for authentic materials for several reasons, the main one being their reproduction of the real world in the artificial environment of the classroom.

2. ESP Today

The growing variety of professions has brought about the need for ESP specialisms, which have several common features, such as specific needs, technical specialized vocabulary, specialized texts, a certain working environment, and so on. In order to meet these subject-specific needs in English teaching/learning, ESP focuses mainly on language skills, structures, functions and vocabulary that will be used by the members of a target group in their professional environment.

As Hutchinson and Waters (1994:19) show, ESP does not represent a particular “kind of language or methodology” but rather “an approach to learning language, which is based on learner needs”.

Nevertheless, the ESP learner and teacher play different roles from those played by the GE learner and teacher. The ESP teacher is not a specialist in the area their students are training in. Learners have knowledge in their field of study that their teacher lacks. He/She has to teach texts which often contain information which is completely new to him/her. This can lead to misunderstandings. A lot of embarrassing situations can be avoided if students training to become automotive engineers, for instance, understand that their English teacher is not supposed to be an expert in cars and everything connected with them. The best results can be obtained by means of a close cooperation between them, students coming up with their specialist knowledge and teachers offering their support with how language is used in the engineering field.

3. Main Criteria when Selecting Materials for ESP Classes

When embarking upon an ESP course, the teacher must take into account several key features of the class he/she is going to teach. The selection of materials and books must be made in accordance with several features:

3.1. The Students’ Age and Personalities

The students’ age is a very important factor that must be considered when teaching materials. When dealing with mixed classes made up of students belonging to different age groups, teachers can easily notice their different reactions to the materials proposed. Teenagers’ tendency is to get easily involved in activities, but they also tend to lose their enthusiasm too quickly. They need diversity and challenging tasks to keep them focused. Adult learners can be divided into two groups according to their needs and expectations. Firstly, there are adults who started learning English at an early stage of their lives, they have continuously improved it and the consequences are visible. Secondly, there are adults who start studying English when they are in their thirties or forties because their job requires it firmly. In their case, the pressure of acquiring a lot of information in a rather short period of time turns out to be a real obstacle in the process of learning English.

At the beginning of the course, the class can be seen as a group of individuals and different personalities. A relaxed atmosphere will encourage creativity, cooperation and constructive competition. Little by little, the teacher will be able to view the class not as a group of individuals, but as a whole. The choice of materials and teaching strategies will be in accordance with the group personality.

3.2. The Students’ Needs

The general educational system is “inadequate or only partly sufficient” (Vizental, 2008:132) for adult professionals. For the people who take up the study of English in order to achieve specific needs, “the language course must reflect these needs both in terms of content (textbook or curriculum) and techniques employed, so as to equip them with the most functional language skills” (132). In other words, mastering the technical vocabulary may prove insufficient for students training to become

engineers if they have not developed the predominant skills for the job. They may know lists of technical words by heart, they may be able to translate technical texts of high complexity, but they may find great difficulty in taking part in conversations and in expressing their own ideas on the same topics fluently and coherently.

The ESP course must bring together the objectives of the curriculum and the students' needs. Before designing the course, the teacher must make a clear comparison between what students know at the present time and what they are supposed to know at the end of the course. The syllabus, the methods and the learning strategies depend closely on this needs analysis. Unfortunately, there is no standard model of needs analysis. It is about using resources as profitably as possible and about cooperating with students in order to decide on the next step.

A diagnostic test may be used to find out about the students' weaknesses. If we analyze the needs of a class of students training to become mechanical engineers, we can see that they all have the same general objective, which is being able to use English successfully at their future working place. However, there are students who already have a job and, consequently, they may have a more specific aim in their mind. Thus, some of them might need to have a good command of English to handle telephone conversations with their foreign partners, to make presentations or write emails in English, or participate in meetings, which involves being able to socialize in English. Since it is impossible to divide the class into several groups and work with them separately in order to meet their exact needs, all that the teacher can do is find a compromise solution, trying to give equal attention to all groups of students.

3.3. The Curriculum

Unlike the traditional language curriculum which "followed the textbook closely, enumerating the texts within and assigning a certain amount of time for each lesson", the modern language curriculum is centered on "language skills, the contents to be taught being subordinated to skill development" (Vizental, 2008:125).

The ESP teacher can choose among several coursebooks. These contain lessons which may have different titles, but they tackle the same topics, focusing on the same communicative functions and on the same language.

3.4. The Students' Linguistic Proficiency

The students' linguistic proficiency must be taken into consideration when selecting materials and deciding on the teaching strategy the teacher is going to use. Beginners need simple texts and extensive drilling. Intermediate students are able to cope with more complex texts and the teacher must choose activities which encourage free production and independent work. The teacher can choose from a variety of authentic materials in order to develop advanced students' creativity. The learners' linguistic proficiency also influences the amount of time they spend on certain activities, the amount of new vocabulary introduced, the types of activities, etc.

4. ESP Materials

Unlike GE materials which focus on one's general ability to communicate in a more effective way, subject-specific materials focus on a particular job or industry. Both types of materials, if selected properly, will help the students develop their skills and enrich their knowledge, but the ESP students are obviously more attracted to materials which they find relevant to their field of study.

As Ellis and Johnson (1994:115) point out, the selection of materials has a great influence on what happens during the course. This influence is visible on three levels:

- It "determines what kind of language the learners will be exposed to and, as a consequence, the substance of what they will learn in terms of vocabulary, structures, and functions";
- It "has implications for the methods and techniques by which the learners will learn";
- Last but not least, "the subject of or content of the materials is an essential component of the package from the point of view of relevance and motivation".

The choice of ESP materials depends on the needs of the students in relation to their present or future jobs. The teacher should choose materials which are centred on the appropriate topics and focus on tasks and activities that put the target skills areas into practice. Materials should also be selected according to the level of language students have already acquired and the target level they will need in order to communicate successfully in their jobs.

One of the main aims of materials is to stimulate students. In order to be able to do that, they need to be "challenging yet achievable; to offer new ideas and information whilst being grounded in the learners' experience and knowledge; to encourage fun and creativity" (Dudley-Evans, 2007:172). Since ESP courses are designed to cater for the students' exact needs and interests, they are more likely than general ELT courses to stimulate and motivate learners. Students are highly interested in studying topics closely connected with their study or work areas.

When selecting reading texts, the teacher must know exactly what the students' expectations are. He/She must also find the right balance between content and language. If the text is too intricate and full of unknown information, the students' efforts will be all directed towards deciphering it and, sooner or later, they will feel demotivated. That is why the teacher should always choose texts which deal with technical issues that students have studied in their technical courses. If they are already familiar with them, the understanding of the text will be guaranteed. In other words, the accessibility of a text is closely connected with the students' background knowledge.

On the other hand, if the text is too accessible, it may become too boring and the learners may lose their interest in it very quickly. Besides, the objective of enriching one's vocabulary is not reached by reading texts which contain few or no unknown words.

It is to the students' own advantage to understand that reading a text will contribute not only to the enrichment of their general and specific vocabulary, to the improvement of their communication skills, but also to the acquisition of new information and knowledge which they will find useful in their future careers.

ESP learners can also benefit from bringing to their language learning some knowledge of their specialist field and the communication specific to it. The students who are already experienced specialists

in their field of study are not to be seen as a threat by the teacher; on the contrary, they should be seen as partners who can improve the learning/teaching process by offering their specialist knowledge.

In heterogeneous groups of students, there are students who have a good level of English and students who are impressively competent at professional areas. Those belonging to the first category possess a very rich technical vocabulary. When they are faced with the task of communicating in English on a particular topic, they have a lot of ideas they want to express, but they do not know how. They are good at translating a text from English into Romanian thanks to the various similarities which exist between the English technical terminology and the Romanian one. This category of students prefers translating lengthy texts, seeing this task as an opportunity to improve their professional knowledge. The other category finds this task rather boring and it might cause them to lose motivation in studying ESP.

When the content of the material to be taught becomes too complex for the ESP teacher to understand, it is essential that he/she should cooperate with a specialist in the students' area of study. Thus, the role of the ESP teacher is to offer language information and to answer language queries. The subject expert will offer conceptual information and will respond to content related queries.

4.1. Ready-made Materials vs. Tailored Materials

The decision on whether to use ready-made materials or tailored materials is closely connected with the students' subject area. If the subject area is more general, the ESP teacher has more chances to find appropriate materials. If it is more specific, the teacher may find it difficult to find suitable materials to meet his/her students' needs. In this case, the generally accepted view is that the ESP teacher should select from the existing ready-made materials and only "when all other possibilities of providing materials have been exhausted" (Hutchinson, Waters, 1994: 125) should they resort to tailored materials.

There is a wide variety of ready-made materials available all over the world. All that the teacher needs to do is find the most appropriate one for his/her students. The most important advantage of using coursebooks is that they save the teacher a lot of time and effort creating new materials. Another advantage is that they are usually accompanied by teacher's guides, additional materials for the students, self-study materials as well as audio and video resources.

The coursebook choice is the most appropriate one on condition that it is based on a flexible approach that combines its use with its adaptation to each and every situation in the learning/teaching process. It is generally argued that teachers should not become the slaves of coursebooks. If we compare several classes of students, we can notice that each one is unique even if their needs and interests are similar. They may have different reactions to the same materials introduced to them by the same teacher, in the same way. The fact that an activity has been successful with a group does not guarantee its success with another group. In other words, the teacher should feel free not to use certain materials that his/her students might find boring or useless and insist on others that they find attractive.

Swales (1980:13) argues that "in ESP the coursebook is seen rather more as an evil, perhaps necessary at first, but to be dispensed with as soon as possible". In spite of all the drawbacks involved in the use of ESP coursebooks, it must be pointed out that most students feel comfortable with them. Besides, there are three other positive aspects about using them and they cannot be neglected. First of all, they are easily accessible when the teacher has no time to create tailored materials. Secondly, they are the

only tool an inexperienced teacher can resort to since he/she is not capable of producing his/her own teaching materials. Last but not least, the ESP teacher adapts his/her strategies to the class size (usually large and even oversized classes), to the students' level (usually heterogeneous classes) and to the students' needs (which are rarely similar).

On the other hand, a coursebook alone is more often than not unlikely to meet the students' needs, the teacher being often forced to resort to additional materials. Moreover, adaptation of these materials is often required, depending on different factors, such as the cultural background of the students. The choice of a technical book, for instance, may also be dictated by the teacher's experience in teaching technical English. Some prefer technically demanding coursebooks whereas others select more accessible ones. Innovative and confident teachers "can feel that some publishers are too conservative in their approach, preferring to publish books that do not take too many risks with novel teaching approaches" (Frendo, 2008:44).

According to some teachers, coursebooks are felt as "contrived because they have been designed to focus on particular lexis or forms" (Frendo, 2008:44) whereas others argue that "there is nothing inherently wrong with using non-authentic language, and it is better to use an artificial text which is packed full of useful lexis, or simplified in some way, because this is effective and efficient" (Frendo:44). Designing tailored materials by ESP teachers is a time-consuming activity and, unfortunately, not very economical. It is estimated that it takes from 5 to 15 hours to prepare a lesson which will be taught in no more than an hour. This is the main reason why designing tailored materials should be seen as the last resort.

In spite of this essential drawback, tailor-made materials are meant to meet the students' exact needs. They can be resorted to by teachers, usually more experienced teachers, whenever they feel that the coursebook is insufficient for the students to reach their aims.

4.2. Authentic vs. Non-authentic Texts

Flowerdew and Peacock (2001:182) contrast the advantages and disadvantages of using authentic materials in EAP. First of all, they point out that authentic texts represent real-world language use. Secondly, authentic texts keep the whole meaning of the initial text. Thirdly, it is authentic texts that prepare trainees for real-world situations. On the other hand, the fact that a text is authentic does not mean that it is relevant. Moreover, authentic texts are often too difficult from a linguistic point of view. The last disadvantage of resorting to authentic texts is that not every authentic text is authentic for a specific class of students.

Whether the materials selected for ESP classes should be authentic or non-authentic has been widely questioned in the ESP literature. ESP teachers' tendency to prefer the former to the latter has been more and more visible lately. According to them, texts should be taken from the real world and not created for pedagogical reasons because they provide a perfect and natural connection between the artificial environment of the classroom and the real world in which the students will put into practice the language they are learning at school. As Reppen (2010) points out, teachers "have expressed a preference for authentic materials in their lessons, using language from natural texts instead of ready-made

examples. In this sense, such corpora provide a ready resource of natural or authentic texts for language learning”.

Authentic materials are extremely important for ESP students because they provide a realistic context for tasks and activities connected with the students’ needs. They increase the students’ motivation, but, unfortunately, they prove to be quite difficult to adapt to the learners’ level of language, especially when it comes to beginners.

Authentic materials show how English is used naturally by native speakers. Claypole (2010:91) emphasizes the importance of using authentic, relevant materials while Gilmore (2007:11) shows that “authentic material is likely to expose learners to a wider variety of grammatical and lexical features but with less frequency than contrived input specifically designed to highlight particular target language”.

Authentic materials can be handed out to each student, asking them to work individually or, even better, in pairs or small groups because in this way they will feel more enthusiastic about carrying out a task. The authentic material may be accompanied by a question handout. The pairs and the groups should be made up of students of different levels so that they complement each other/one another. For the authentic materials to be effective, the questions must offer the students the chance to practise English, to become confident in their English skills and to come in contact with cultural customs and differences.

Coursebooks and authentic materials are not mutually exclusive. Unadapted texts are still authentic even if they appear in a coursebook. Coursebook listening activities which contain unadapted native speaker interviews are authentic since they have not been changed.

There are various sources from which authentic materials can be taken. Nowadays, teachers choose the Internet as the most reliable source of authentic texts. Teachers and students alike have access to a wide variety of materials, from texts, visual materials, newspapers and magazines to live radio and TV. Unlike printed materials which date quickly, the Internet is continuously updated, offering students a lot of information about how the technological world develops. The resources of authentic English may maintain and stimulate motivation, the result being even more encouraging if students understand that they do not need to know every single word of the text in order to get its general idea.

5. Conclusions

To sum it up, the task of finding the most suitable materials for ESP classes is far from being an easy one. There are several features the teacher must consider such as the students’ age and personalities, their needs, the curriculum as well as the students’ linguistic proficiency. There are no absolute criteria ESP teachers can rely on when choosing teaching/learning materials and deciding whether to use ready-made materials or tailored materials. A commonly accepted view is to select from the existing printed coursebooks and to use writing materials only when the materials on the market do not manage to meet the students’ needs.

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