

DEVELOPING TEACHING MATERIALS FOR ESP PROGRAMS: AN EXAMPLE AT SCHOOL OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES - UEH

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Introduction

The School of Foreign Languages at the University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City (SFL-UEH) is developing a new English training program for non-English major students. The goal is to replace the current General Business English program with English for Specific Purposes (ESP) programs, which will be more tailored to the students' needs in their studies and future careers. In addition to developing the new programs, the SFL lecturers have compiled ESP teaching materials for several training majors at UEH. The materials design is undertaken under the approaches and models suggested by renowned scholars and educational experts. This paper briefly describes the process of designing ESP teaching materials with the aim of sharing experiences and highlighting the difficulties and challenges of this professional work.

The current English program for non-English major students

The SFL is now operating the English Program for non-English major students, that is, those who study other majors rather than the English language. For them, English is a subject tool in their curricula. The entire program is divided into four modules, and the total time allocated for each module is 60 class periods (4 credits) lasting for two years in 4 semesters.

The program aims to familiarize students with basic Business English, regarded as the foundation on which their knowledge of specialized English will be built. Four language skills are trained simultaneously, but reading is more focused on. Apparently, the course emphasizes developing students' ability to engage themselves in the kind of English widely used in the business world. Also, the university has set the TOEIC score as a requirement for graduates. The standard scores are 600 for students majoring in Foreign Trade, Tourism, and International Business and 550 for students of other majors.

After 15 years of use, the English program for non-English major students needs improvements to meet the ever-changing requirements of UEH training objectives and the labor market. In short, the new English program seeks to address three major objectives to enable students (i) to build the professional language and communication skills required for the modern world of business; (ii) to access reference materials in English which are necessary for their training time at the university and jobs-to-be after graduation and (iii) to attain a high score in international English test.

Materials and language teaching

Teaching materials play an essential role in language programs because they generally serve as the basis for much of the language input learners receive and the language practice that occurs in the classroom. Nunan (1991: 208 cited in Richard (1986) and Wright (1987) emphasises that

"instructional materials can provide detailed specifications of content, even in the absence of a syllabus. They can help define the goals of the syllabus and the roles of teachers and learners within the instructional process."

The coursebook is a central feature of much teaching, controlling at least some of the language that is presented and the activities that are used. Indeed, much of the language teaching that occurs throughout the world today could not take place without the extensive use of materials in general and commercial textbooks in particular. However, Richards (1998:136) points out some potential negative effects of commercial textbooks as follows: (i) They can deskill teachers: if teachers use textbooks as the primary source of their teaching, their role can become reduced to that of a technician, and they may lose the ability to teach creatively and thoughtfully. (ii) They do not reflect students' needs: because textbooks are often written for the global market, they cannot serve the interests of students with particular needs in a specific context. In this light, Cunningsworth (1995:5) remarks

"No coursebook designed for the general market will be absolutely ideal for your particular group of learners, but the aim is to find the best possible fit, together with the potential for adapting or supplementing parts of the material where it is inadequate or unsuitable."

As for ESP, according to Dudley-Evans & St. John (1998), it has been a materials-led movement and until recently, part of the role of ESP teachers had been to write teaching materials to meet the needs of learners. Rozul (1995: 211) had the same idea when he answered why materials in ESP were written for his first-year students.

"... because of the real need for ESP materials that are learner-centered and that answer specific learning needs as dictated by the need analysis done. We could not simply buy books and materials from bookstore shelves. No one else could write materials for us. We were the ones who knew our students – their needs, abilities, limitations, idiosyncrasies, and expectations – and writing materials for them would simply be, in a way, a kind of a second nature to us, understanding them the way we did. "

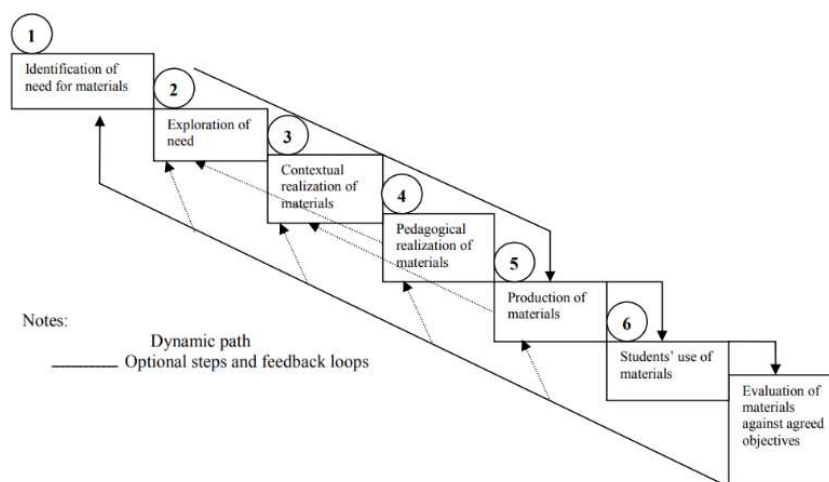
Finally, materials writing is one of the aspects that can help lead teachers to a fuller and more participatory understanding of some of the complexities of the language classroom. As Tomlinson (2000) argues, materials development can not only help teachers develop practical expertise as materials developers. It can also help teachers articulate and develop their own theories of language learning and teaching, develop skills that can enable them to apply these theories to practice and develop personal attributes that can help them become more confident and positive people and more effective teachers.

Approaches to materials design

It is essential to understand the nature of materials development and the process that are typically involved if quality materials are to be created. Littlejohn and Windeatt (1989) point out that materials development has an underlying instructional philosophy, approach, method, and content, including both linguistic and cultural information. Tomlinson (2000) lists several approaches based on which materials can be developed, such as TPR (Total Physical Response) Plus, the Multi-Dimensional Approach, and the Language Awareness Approach. In his study about theory and practice in materials production, Hall (1995) recommends some approaches applied to materials development, including Notion-Structural Approach, Communicative Approach, Genre-Based Approach, and Experimental Approach. Also, some scholars relate materials development to current ELT methodology/theory, e.g., Lexical Approach, Corpus Linguistics, and Post-Communicative pedagogy. Thus, to achieve effective materials, writers are required to use a specific approach that most suits the needs of learners in that context and fits in with their own learning and teaching traditions.

It can be said that materials development is a process that requires teachers or writers to invest much effort and time in it. Writing materials is, unavoidably, a matter of trial and error. Hence, all writers, both newcomers and experienced, need a ground in writing materials to reduce some risks. In this process, Dudley-Evans & St. John (1998) claim that EFL teachers must be able to select materials appropriately from what is available, be creative with what is known, modify activities to suit the learner's needs, and supplement materials by providing extra activities. The materials, on the other hand, should be significant as a source of language, as a learning support, for classroom motivation and stimulation, and for reference.

Jolly and Bolitho (1998:97) summarize the various steps involved in the process of materials design in the form of a diagram shown below. It can help materials designers understand the fundamental steps of materials development and how these same steps will occur in most contexts.



The process of materials design suggested by Jolly and Bolitho (1998)

Also, according to Jolly and Bolitho (1998:111), the process of materials design raises almost every issue that is important in learning to teach: the selection and grading of language, awareness of language, knowledge of learning theories, socio-cultural appropriacy, etc. Nunan (1991) agrees about this substance and suggests the procedure of materials design through four stages as follows

1. Identify the learners' areas of interest in broad thematic terms.
2. Identify a series of communication situations related to that theme and link them to form an action sequence
3. Select or devise materials appropriate to the situations in the action sequence.
4. Choose language points to focus on from the materials.

(Nunan; 1991: 219 cited in Corbel (1985))

The process of ESP materials design at SFL-UH

The process of ESP materials design at SFL-UH is systematic and rigorous, involving several steps to ensure that the materials are relevant, effective, and engaging for UEH students. The SFL lecturers adopted a practical framework developed by Jolly and Bolitho (1998), mentioned in Figure 1. The Jolly and Bolitho framework is summarized with examples from our own context.

Step One: Identification of need

First of all, a meeting was held with the participation of leaders of UEH colleges and schools to gather opinions and comments for the ESP program development. Indeed, the contributions of those who directly run the training programs help SFL lecturers understand the needs of their curricula and students in the English language. From the conclusion of this meeting, SFL made decisions about which ESP programs to develop, as well as having the basis for designing syllabi and choosing teaching materials topics.

Once the framework of the ESP program is set up, the next step is to conduct a thorough needs analysis to identify the specific needs of the target learners. This is done by collecting data from a variety of resources, such as interviews with students, employers, and ESP teachers, and analysis of the learners' current job tasks and responsibilities.

Step Two: Exploration of language

The results from need analysis enabled SFL lecturers to draw up the syllabus's objectives and assess the range of the student's language needs, defined language functions, grammar, vocabulary, genre, and so on for developing skills and language in professional communication situations. The syllabus outlines the

course's learning objectives, the topics to be covered, the appropriate learning materials to be selected and developed, and the assessment methods.

Step Three: Contextual realization

ESP materials should be contextualized realities, learners' experiences, knowledge background, and socio-cultural conditions. In this step, the SFL lecturers contextualize materials to topics and themes that provide meaningful, purposeful uses for the target language. One of the main benefits for teachers to create their own materials is that they can choose the contexts that relate to their students in a way that a coursebook cannot. The context in which the teaching and learning occur will impact the types of materials that may need to be designed. We use a variety of criteria to contextualize resources, including:

- **Relevance:** The materials must be relevant to the needs of the target learners and the topics covered in the syllabus.
- **Authenticity:** The materials should be authentic, reflecting the real-world language and situations that learners will encounter in their future jobs.
- **Effectiveness:** The materials should be effective in helping learners achieve the course's learning objectives.
- **Engagement:** The materials should be engaging and motivating for learners.

Step Four: Pedagogical realization

We carefully plan instructions in terms of exercises and activities that meet the needs identified in step one. This involves grouping the materials into units and then arranging the units in a way that will help the learners to make progress systematically. Teachers have to consider other criteria when designing the ESP materials: providing motivational activities so that the students enjoy discovering the applicability of their knowledge. Therefore, guidance in developing research, writing, or presentation skills should be an essential part of our learning materials.

Step five: Physical Production

Create the materials in paper in a way that can be accessed by learners. The teachers have also developed a variety of online resources for their students, such as interactive exercises, listening and reading comprehension materials, and video lectures. These resources are designed to help students learn at their own pace and practice the skills they need for their future jobs.

Next steps

Since materials development is an ongoing process, the writers will perform pilot tests or evaluative reviews so as to adjust materials over time in response to implementation outcomes.

Challenges in materials design

First, identifying the students' needs is challenging for many reasons. The challenge we encounter is choosing the methods for your needs analysis. Among various methods for needs analysis, such as surveys, interviews, focus groups, observations, or document reviews, we have to employ the questionnaire survey due to the lack of time, personnel, and even finance. Consequently, it requires a great amount of effort, time, and deliberation to deal with any limitations, biases, or gaps in the data to ensure that the findings are accurate and credible. Additionally, analyzing the data from needs analysis is a big problem when the writers must perform various tasks, including organizing, synthesizing, and interpreting the data. The lack of expertise in using statistics tools is a reason causing the difficulties at this stage.

Selecting appropriate, relevant, and engaging resources for materials development is a challenging task and the prime responsibility of material developers. However, most of our materials writers claim that selecting appropriate resources for materials design is time-consuming and out of convenience, especially seeking and selecting authentic materials. Regarding ESP materials within a needs analysis framework, not only

texts/resources but tasks designed for teaching will be authentic if they focus on the use of language in the real world. It might be the controversy of using authentic texts for low-level students, so we must adjust and modify them to suit the average level for most students.

The source of materials is predominantly the Internet, as well as newspaper or magazine articles and textbooks. However, it took a lot of time to find out the appropriate ones. Furthermore, if not guided by clear criteria, teachers may make inconsistent or poor choices of authentic texts.

In addition, in order to develop the ESP learning materials to be achieved by the student efficiently, the writers need to have background knowledge related to the fields of study in which the students majored. Students will be more highly motivated to learn about topics and texts related to their study or work areas. However, it is challenging for language teachers to understand the issues or even the specialized terms in different academic majors.

An essential factor to consider in designing materials is copyright compliance. Therefore, we must ensure that the original material is not copied or used without a license by third parties. Teachers must be aware of the restrictions copyright laws place on copying authentic materials, published materials, and materials downloaded from the Internet. In other words, we must be aware of copyright protection measures to ensure they have created themselves using original material.

Conclusion

This paper does provide a glimpse into the materials development process at the SFL-UEH, with the findings highlighting the difficulties and challenges encountered by the participants in this process. What is mentioned above affirms that the process of materials development should be established predominantly around what teachers already know about their student's needs to produce materials that fit the requirements of a specific learning situation. This can also contribute significantly to reducing the risk of failure in teacher-designed materials. Additionally, to create effective materials, the writers should have thorough background knowledge of basic concepts and principles underlying materials design. A review of the well-known experts' guidelines for the materials design process is necessary to help direct the writers in preparing and developing materials. In this sense, this study recommends the accessible framework offered by Jolly and Bolitho to ensure they adhere to all the steps in the materials development process.

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