

Review research paper

**ADAPTING CONTENT-BASED MATERIAL IN ESP COURSES:
THE EXAMPLE OF DEBORAH POTTER'S *HANDBOOK OF
INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM***

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Abstract. *The search for suitable teaching materials in ESP classes requires a lot of effort as available materials rarely satisfy all the specific needs of language learners in a particular subject area or syllabus. This is why some ESP teachers resort to adapting existing learning materials. This paper describes the motivation to adapt authentic content-based material for the use in English for Journalism courses within the academic study program of Journalism at the University of Zagreb. It outlines concrete techniques employed in adapting the Handbook of Independent Journalism written by Deborah Potter. These adapting techniques, primarily deletion and omitting, supplementation and rewriting of the original text, help learners to better identify specific morpho-syntactic features of English for Journalism, which is required by the syllabus. The main effect of material adaptation is better identification and acquisition of morpho-syntactic structures pertaining to English for Journalism. Overall, the adapted material re-engages learners with the content of the Handbook and thus enhances learning.*

Key words: *English for Specific Purposes (ESP), English for Journalism, materials adaptation, adaptation techniques*

1. INTRODUCTION

Selecting suitable teaching materials is an important element of all ESP courses. In conjunction with needs analysis and course objectives, teaching materials are often the most tangible element of an ESP course from the learner's perspective. Learners readily identify the material they use in class with the course itself, as the learning material largely shapes the content of the course, the way a course is delivered and the way learning and assessment are structured.

Of course, the selection of appropriate materials relies on several widely accepted tenets of modern ESP instruction. Firstly, ESP materials should cater to the needs of learners. In learner-centered approach as espoused by Hutchinson and Waters (1987), the appropriateness of materials is conducive to learning as good learning materials create motivation to learn and facilitate learning. Hutchinson sums it up best: "Good materials

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do not teach: they encourage learners to learn“ (1987, 107). In that respect, Tomlinson makes an important distinction between learning and teaching materials, deliberately using the term learning materials which are designed for learning English (2008, 3).

Secondly, ESP materials are a window to the language of learners' subject discipline and future profession because they provide exposure to authentic use of English within the specific subject area. Authentic materials¹ are widely used by ESP course designers and have proved to be effective teaching resources as they enable learners to face the professional language they will deal with in the real labour world (Oblovatskaya 2017, 96). In this relation, Dudley-Evans and St John define two concepts necessary for understanding the role of authentic content: *carrier content* and *real content* (1998, 11-12). Carrier content refers to the subject matter of an exercise; it is typically an authentic topic that can be used as a means for teaching real content which is the language or skill content of an exercise.

In addition to being learner-centred and having authentic content relevant for learners' field of study, good English learning materials are guided by several universal principles (Tomlinson 2013, 28). One of these principles seems especially relevant for ESP: “the learners' attention should be drawn to linguistic features of the input (so that they are alerted to subsequent instances of the same feature in future input) (Tomlinson, 2013, 28). In other words, learners need to identify morpho-syntactic features of the genre so that they can re-use it. Similarly, Tomlinson adds that “materials should maximise learning potential by encouraging intellectual, aesthetic and emotional involvement which stimulates both right and left brain activities.” (2013, 29)

In search of suitable learning materials for English for Journalism, a compulsory undergraduate course taught at the Faculty of Political Science at the University of Zagreb, ESP teachers² have evaluated the existing materials on the market and selected two coursebooks which meet the requirements of the syllabus of English for Journalism. They are: *Collins Cobuild Key words in the media*³ and *Handbook of Independent Journalism*⁴. These materials constitute the backbone of ESP teaching/learning in English for Journalism because they complement each other well.⁵ *Collins Cobuild Key words in the media* focuses on different lexical activities which allow for the standard present-practise-produce (PPP) model of instruction. *Handbook of Independent Journalism*, on the other hand, is more academic; it contains texts which explain fundamental concepts in journalism and media. The two materials strike the right balance between practical vocabulary in use and academic theory in the subject area of learners' study.

The aim of this paper is to describe why and how the content-based *Handbook of Independent Journalism* written by Deborah Potter has been adapted to enhance learning in English for Journalism classes. The paper will state the motivation to adapt learning materials in ESP classes in general and in this particular case, and also show principles and concrete techniques for adapting a content-based coursebook in ESP classes.

¹ Ellederova elaborates on the ambiguous use of the term *authentic*. Among other important considerations of the term, she clarifies how it is sometimes used to denote original material as opposed to adapted material, but it is also used to denote texts not written especially for language learning (2022, 194).

² Saša Bjelobaba, PhD and the author of this paper as teachers of English for Journalism 1 and 2.

³ Maccull, Bill. *Collins Cobuild Key words in the media*. London: Harper-Collins, 1995.

⁴ Potter, Deborah. *Handbook of Independent Journalism*. Washington D.C.: Bureau of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State, 2006.

⁵ Newspaper and magazine articles as well as videos are used as supplementary material.

2. MOTIVATION TO ADAPT THE *HANDBOOK OF INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM* FOR ESP PURPOSES

According to Hutchinson and Waters, there are three possible ways of choosing teaching material: selecting from existing materials (material evaluation), writing your own materials (materials development) and modifying existing materials (materials adaptation) (1987, 96). Very often learning materials available on the market cannot satisfy the needs of specific learners in particular cultural and academic settings.⁶ This is why many ESP teachers resort to adapting existing materials⁷ and it is probably safe to say that adapting course materials often goes with the job of ESP teachers. In fact, Tomlinson predicts continuation of the trend of “greater personalization and localization of materials” (2013, 2). This is especially true if we take into account that materials adaptation seems less time-consuming than materials development.

Iulia Para says that materials adaptation is mainly a process of “matching”, i.e. to maximise the appropriacy of teaching materials in context, by varying some of the inner features of a textbook to better suit our particular circumstances (2022, 174). Indeed, it is the particular features of an otherwise adequate material that require teacher intervention. Very often, interventions in content-based materials used in ESP classes require the pedagogical and linguistic apparatus as the carrier content is already there. Saraceni explains that such interventions fall within the so-called teacher-centred approach to adaptation where learners have a passive role (2013, 51).

McDonough and Shaw (2013, 67) list different reasons for adapting:

- not enough grammar coverage in general;
- not enough grammar points of particular difficulty to these learners;
- the communicative focus means that grammar is presented unsystematically;
- comprehension questions are too easy, because the answer can be elevated straight from the paragraph with no real understanding;
- inauthentic listening passages, as they sound very much like the written material that is read out;
- not enough guidance on pronunciation;
- subject matter inappropriate for learners of this age and intellectual level;
- photographs or other illustrative material, not culturally acceptable;
- amount of materials too great/ too little to cover in the time allocated to lessons;
- dialogues too formal, and not really representative of everyday speech;
- too much or too little variety in the activities;
- lexicon and the key to the exercises would be helpful.

If McDonough and Shaw’s evaluation criteria are applied, the *Handbook of Independent Journalism* does not offer enough grammar coverage, which is a problem because course objectives require the analysis of morpho-syntactic elements and relevant terminology in authentic journalism-related texts. Moreover, the *Handbook of Independent Journalism* lacks the pedagogical apparatus, i.e. instructions, exercises, tasks, comprehension questions, tests

⁶ Unlike Business English and Academic English, the offer of commercial coursebooks in the area of English for Journalism/Media is much smaller.

⁷ Marjanovikj-Apostolovski lists different terms that this material is commonly referred to: “in-house materials, tailor-made materials, locally produced materials, self-designed materials, internal materials, home-made materials or home-grown materials“ (2019, 162). Julia Para adds another term, “doctored texts” (2022, 173).

and summaries which would draw learners' attention to the specifics of English for Journalism. In other words, it has relevant and engaging carrier content but has no explicit pedagogical, linguistic or discourse-related real content relevant for ESP.

3. PRINCIPLES AND TECHNIQUES OF ADAPTING MATERIALS

Once ESP teachers decide that adapting the existing material is a suitable option for their needs, they should proceed to selecting appropriate procedures, methods or techniques. Tomlinson explains that this is in fact a formal process which includes several steps (2013, 489). It is worth noticing however, that the first three steps in that process seem compulsory for all adaptation techniques whereas subsequent techniques seem optional and can be used either alone or in combination with one another:

- profiling a class,
- analysing a set of materials,
- evaluating the materials,
- subtracting sections of the materials which are likely to be unsuitable/ineffective for the target learners,
- reducing sections of the materials which are unlikely to engage the target learners,
- replacing sections of the materials with new materials which are more likely to be suitable/effective,
- expanding those sections of the materials which are likely to be suitable/effective,
- modifying sections of the materials to increase their likelihood of being suitable/effective,
- adding new sections of materials which are likely to increase the effectiveness of the 'unit',
- modifying sections of the materials to increase their likelihood of being suitable/effective,
- adding new sections of materials which are likely to increase the effectiveness of the 'unit'.

A similar model describes the following techniques of materials adaptation (Hyland 2013, 397):

- Adding: supplementing what the textbook offers with extra readings, tasks or exercises.
- Deleting: omitting repetitive, irrelevant, potentially unhelpful or difficult items.
- Modifying: rewriting rubrics, examples, activities or explanations to improve relevance, impact or clarity.
- Simplifying: rewriting to reduce the difficulty of tasks, explanations or instructions.
- Reordering: changing the sequence of units or activities to fit more coherently with course goals.

It is important to note that content can be adapted using a range of the techniques mentioned above or a single technique can be applied to different content areas.⁸ Para (2022, 175) adds that once we decide on the techniques of materials adaptation we should

⁸ For a close review of literature into textbook adaptation strategies in ELT also see: Mede, Enisa, and Senel Yalçın. "Utilizing Textbook Adaptation Strategies: Experiences and Challenges of Novice and Experienced EFL Instructors." *TESOL International Journal* 14.1 (2019): 91-104.

opt for the form of modification of content: this can be achieved in the form of exercises, activities, instructions, tests, etc.

The choice of a particular technique is a result of a measurement of the gap between what the materials contain and the requirement of a particular teaching aim. In our case, material adaptation was guided by the desire to provide learners with the opportunity to better identify the language of the *Handbook of Independent Journalism* by breaking it down into smaller morphosyntactic units. As Hutchinson points out, if we want to enable learners to use language, we should provide them with the material which offers both opportunities for analysis and synthesis. (1987, 109). Our adaptation model would therefore fall best into Hutchinson's category of *language focus* which is a step in a typical lesson format where learners have the chance to take the language to pieces, study how it works and practice putting it back together (Hutchinson 1987, 109).

An important effect of material adaptation of the content-based material is the fact that by doing exercises of the *language focus* type learners have the chance to revisit and re-experience the text again. Tomlinson explains that in the activities devised learners re-engage with the text (2013, 102). The following section will show several adaptation techniques that modified the texts from *Handbook of Independent Journalism* to highlight specialist language.

3. EXAMPLES OF MATERIAL ADAPTATION

This section describes the techniques employed in adapting the *Handbook of Independent Journalism*. The techniques were selected to emphasise concrete morpho-syntactic units in the text. They included: deleting/ omitting words from original text; adding/supplementing the handbook with extra tasks or exercises and rewriting activities to simplify the difficulty of the text.

3.1. Deleting/omitting

Using the deleting and omitting technique the text was turned into a gap-fill exercise to activate learners' knowledge of the tenses within the subject topic of the news. Fig. 1 shows a segment of typical exercise which practices the use of tenses. Learners revisit the text they have already read and understood but this time they practice verbs. In this particular example, practice is important because learners often make the mistake of using a plural verb with the word *news*.

<p>1. Put the verbs in brackets in the appropriate form:</p> <p>WHAT <input type="text"/> (BE) NEWS?</p> <p>The answer to the question "What <input type="text"/> (BE) news?" may seem obvious. News <input type="text"/> (BE) what is new; it's what <input type="text"/> (HAPPEN). Look it up in the dictionary, and you <input type="text"/> (FIND) news described as "a report of recent events or previously unknown information." But most of the things that <input type="text"/> (HAPPEN) in the world every day <input type="text"/> (NOT FIND) their way into the newspaper or onto the air in a newscast. (...)</p>

Fig. 1 Practising verb tenses

The same technique was used to practice synonyms (Fig. 2), antonyms and translation. Synonyms, antonyms or translations were added in brackets to elicit the original term from the text.

The Journalist's Role

Fill in the gaps with the synonymous expressions:

New technologies have made it possible for anyone with a computer to **diss** (**DISPERSE; DIFFUSE**) information as widely as the **l** (**BIGGEST**) news organizations. But a well-designed Internet site, no matter how well it's written or how often it's updated, is not necessarily a **r** (**TRUSTWORTHY; DEPENDABLE**) source of news. The truth is that in a complex world where information is no longer a **s** (**RARE**) commodity, the role of the journalist has become more important than ever. (...)

Fig. 2 Practising synonyms

3.2. Adding/supplementing

Another modification technique is adding, i.e. supplementing the text with extra activities. Learners first need to analyse the categories of partiality and impartiality (Fig. 3a).

1. Sort the following expressions into the two categories below:

(1) **A COMPLETE AND HONEST PICTURE** (2) **BALANCE** (3) **BIAS**
 (4) **DO NOT REFLECT THEIR OWN PERSONAL VIEWS** (5) **FAIRNESS**
 (6) **FAVORING ONE SIDE OR ANOTHER** (7) **IMPARTIAL AND FAIR**
 (8) **OBJECTIVE** (9) **ONE-SIDED STORIES**
 (10) **LIES OR DISTORTIONS** (11) **OPINION-DRIVEN REPORTING**
 (12) **SEEK OUT DIFFERING OPINIONS**

IMPARTIALITY: () () () () () () () ()
PARTIALITY: () () () () () () () ()

Fig. 3a Analysing and categorising the concepts of partiality and impartiality

In the second step, the above 12 phrases need to be inserted into the text adapted from the *Handbook of Independent Journalism*. The second step of adaptation uses the omitting/deleting technique (Fig. 3b).

2. Fill in the blanks with the expressions from activity 1:

Objectivity and Fairness

The concept of objectivity in journalism developed almost a century ago, as a reaction to the sensational, [] that was common in most newspapers of the day. The term “objectivity” was originally used to describe a journalistic approach or method; journalists would seek to present the news in an [] way, without reflecting any personal or corporate [].

Over time, objectivity was required from the journalists themselves. The executive editor of the American newspaper The Washington Post, Leonard Downie, took the concept so seriously that he refused to register to vote. But many journalists today concede that total objectivity is impossible. In 1996, the U.S. Society of Professional Journalists dropped the word “objectivity” from its code of ethics. Journalists are human beings, after all. They care about their work and they do have opinions. Claiming that they are completely objective suggests that they have no values. Instead, journalists have largely agreed that they must be aware of their own opinions so they can keep them in check. The audience should not be able to tell from the story what the journalist’s opinion is. By using an objective, scientific method for verifying information, journalists can report stories that []. The story itself, in other words, should be [].

Journalists also strive to be fair in their reporting by not telling []. They look for contrasting views and report on them without []. In addition to verifying assertions of fact, they will [] in cases where the facts are in dispute.

[] is not the same thing as balance, however. [] suggests that there are only two sides to any story, which is rarely the case, and that each side should be given equal weight. Journalists who seek that kind of artificial balance in their stories actually may produce coverage that is fundamentally inaccurate. For example, the vast majority of independent economists may agree on the consequences of a particular spending policy while a small handful has a different opinion, which has been proven wrong by past experience. A story giving equal time or space to the views of both groups would be misleading.

The challenge for journalists is to report all significant viewpoints in a way that is fair to those involved and that also presents [] to the audience. “Fairness means, among other things, listening to different viewpoints, and incorporating them into the journalism,” says reporter and blogger Dan Gillmor. “It does not mean parroting [] to achieve that lazy equivalence that leads some journalists to get opposing quotes when the facts overwhelmingly support one side.”

Fig. 3b Contextualising the phrases

3.3. Rewriting

Rewriting is another modifying technique applied to lexical chunks and collocations. The original text is rewritten by rephrasing (Fig. 4). Again, learners have the opportunity to re-engage with the content of original texts, this time interpreting it with different vocabulary and structures.

I Rewrite or rephrase. Do not change the meaning.

- 1 The journalists tried to cram all the facts in.
- 2 The story is overstuffed with information.
- 3 I try to catch up on the news.
- 4 I selected the best soundbite from the interview.
- 5 Journalists must steer clear from euphemisms.
- 6 Getting someone's name wrong is the kind of error that can erode a journalist's credibility.
- 7 It can distort the meaning of the story.
- 8 Radio newscasts thrive on immediacy.
- 9 Without a structure, a story is just a jumble of facts.
- 10 The editor trimmed the journalist's story.

Fig 4. Rephrasing

7. CONCLUSION

The evaluation and selection of ESP materials is often driven by the wish to enhance learning by ensuring exposure to authentic, content-based materials in the subject field of study. The selection of authentic content-based materials is a good choice for ESP classes because they offer subject-specific language; terminology, syntax and stylistic conventions in texts written by experts. However, if content-based material is not primarily written for the purpose of acquiring English for Specific Purposes, as is the case of Deborah Potter's *Handbook of Independent Journalism*, it lacks the pedagogical and linguistic apparatus needed to focus learners' attention to special features of ESP. This is why content-based material is adapted by ESP teachers.

In our particular case, adaptation techniques are based on discourse analysis of morpho-syntactic units. The first step is to identify field-specific syntax and terminology in the texts. Adaptation techniques are then applied: deleting/omitting, adding/supplementing and rewriting/simplifying. The exercises created with these techniques practice the use of nouns (journalistic terms) with accompanying synonyms and antonyms, verb forms, prepositions and translation.

The effect of material adaptation is re-engaging learners with the content-based material, enhanced learning of subject-specific language and increased reading comprehension.

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