

**TEACHERS AS MATERIAL DESIGNERS -  
INSIGHTS FROM DESIGNING AN ESP COURSE BOOK  
(ENGLISH FOR POLITICAL SCIENCE AND DIPLOMACY)**

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**Abstract.** *The inexistence of ready-made context-responsive materials for English for Specific Purposes (ESP) areas is a major drawback, but in such an environment teachers can become active agents. This is a small-scale empirical study on the actual processes employed by a team of authors engaged in designing their own ESP materials to suit their unique realities. Material design for this practical pedagogical approach is a time consuming and challenging process, but by collaborative work teachers can explore new avenues for professional development and reflect on the ESP principles. The learning focus and the intended outcomes, as well as contributing to functional knowledge and skills, were the leading factors in these dual-focused materials integrating content and language. To that end, the focus in the ESP coursebook analyzed in this paper is on the vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension.*

**Key words:** *material writing, material evaluation, content and language, ESP*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the case of well-established disciplines, such as business, banking, accounting, and so on, ESP teachers most often can act in line with this commonly accepted view because there is a rich bank of commercial general business and subject-specific textbooks. This is not the case with some subject areas, for which there are only a few or no subject specific textbooks available. To provide students with the materials that will cater for their specific needs, many ESP teachers are faced with the challenge of writing tailor-made materials.

Benefits of content-based approach in a foreign language classroom are numerous. Students develop both language and academic skills by learning the content in the L2. Materials are thematically organized and it is believed that it is easier to remember and learn.

The large number of different professions has brought about the need for ESP, all of which share some common characteristics, such as specific needs, technical specialized vocabulary and documentation, specialized texts and interaction, an identifiable working environment, and so on (Harding, 2007: 6). To cater for these subject-specific needs in English teaching/learning, ESP predominantly focuses on language skills, structures,

functions and vocabulary that will be needed by the members of a chosen target group in their professional and vocational environment.

There are situations of lack or a gap in the course materials where teacher-generated materials are indispensable to make the course successful. If the market does not offer context-responsive materials for teachers who wish to integrate curricular content in their English language lessons, teachers become active agents of change in this regard and work towards the development of ESP materials. Teacher-developed materials can be time consuming and challenging to produce. However, teachers can explore new avenues for professional development and reflect on ESP principles according to curricular demands and local needs and opportunities. Teachers prepare materials of their own either by searching for and adapting authentic materials or by producing materials from scratch (Moore & Lorenzo 2007, 28).

Considering the issue of teacher-generated material, Hutchinson and Waters (2010) propose a materials design model, which provides a coherent framework for the integration of various aspects of learning: input, content, language and task. Hyland (2006) argues that though the materials development process can vary widely, depending on local circumstances, it typically begins with the identified need for materials, e.g. students require further practice in a particular area, which is followed by the teacher exploring a given area in order to gain a better understanding of the particular skill(s) or feature(s) involved. Hutchinson and Waters (1994: 19) emphasize that ESP “is not a particular kind of language or methodology” but “an approach to language learning, which is based on learner need”. According to Harding (2007: 6) “in ESP the purpose for learning the language is paramount and relates directly to what the learner needs to do in their vocation or job” and “the sense of purpose and the sense of vocation”.

## 2. ON ESP MATERIALS

Materials selection, adaptation, or writing tailor-made materials, is an important area in ESP teaching. Effective course development provides students with materials aimed at equipping them with the knowledge they will need in their future working environment. Questions usually raised when designing ESP materials include whether the materials selected should be primarily subject specific and the most appropriate ratio of general materials to subject-specific materials is. General materials focus on one’s general ability to communicate more effectively, while subject-specific materials focus on a particular job or industry (Ellis and Johnson, 1994). ESP learners will very often feel more affinity for materials that they find relevant to their area of specialism.

According to Prabhu (1994: 94), another important issue regarding materials is that they should be used as sources: “The fact that materials need to be used as sources rather than as pre-constructed courses should not be regarded as a weakness of task-based teaching; it can in fact be a strength for any form of teaching”. As Ellis and Johnson (1994: 115) emphasize, the choice of materials has a major impact on what happens in the course. This impact is demonstrated on the following three levels:

1. 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.”

2. It “has implications for the methods and techniques by which the learners will learn.”

3. “the subject of or content of the materials is an essential component of the package from the point of view of relevance and motivation.”

Since ESP is predominantly student-centered, students’ considerations should be considered with highest selection criteria. According to Lewis and Hill, students’ considerations include the following:

- Will the materials be useful to the students?
- Do they stimulate students’ curiosity?
- Are the materials relevant to the students and their needs?
- Are they fun to do?
- Will the students find the tasks and activities worth doing?

(adapted from Lewis and Hill, 1993: 52-53)

After analyzing learner needs and setting objectives for the course, the ESP teacher has to select materials that will help the students achieve the course objectives (Ellis and Johnson, 1994). In addition, the materials should relate closely to the learners’ specific skills and content needs, which is an important precondition for full exploitation of the materials as well as the learners’ motivation.

Whether to use a readily available textbook or tailor-made materials is a decision primarily based on the learners’ subject area. ESP teachers most often select suitable materials from the existing published materials. In the case of more specific subject areas, the most widely accepted view is that ESP teachers should also first “question whether the learners’ needs are significantly different from those of other groups” and, if possible, select from existing published materials and resort to writing materials “when all other possibilities of providing materials have been exhausted” (Hutchinson and Waters, 1994: 125). Tailor-made materials provide the teacher with the opportunity to decide on combinations of vocabulary, functions and structures and to develop materials that will introduce most relevant vocabulary and related functions and structures. According to Haycraft (1987), psychologically a textbook represents something concrete and as such it gives a measure of progress and achievement throughout the course. Therefore, materials should present a logical whole and represent a sequence of units which is logical and enables the students to see and evaluate their progress. Tailor-made materials equip students with directly applicable knowledge.

When designing tailor-made materials, it is advisable for teachers to consider a set of general considerations. According to Haycraft (1987: 127), they include:

- length of the course;
- target audience of the course;
- appropriate structural grading: students should be taught what they need to know “in the right order with the right priorities”;
- vocabulary should be useful and in current use;
- appropriate idiomatic English;
- materials should be “visually alive” and “well presented”.

### 3. THE CASE OF OUR ESP MATERIAL DESIGN

As teachers of English in political sciences, we were faced with the challenge of writing materials for the first-year students at our faculty. The process of writing materials is an ongoing process, in which materials can be updated on the basis of pre-use, in-use, and

post-use evaluations. The material we have designed has accordingly been subject to all of three evaluations, while this article focuses only on the post-use evaluation. In our ESP classes we experimented with a series of self-designed tasks and activities. Focusing on lexis and comprehension we based our tasks on authentic materials.

Our course book consists of four sections (relevant and in line with the remaining subjects in the curriculum, including EU, International Relations, Diplomacy, Britain and the USA - Institutions) with units following a pattern that includes an introduction to the topic – an authentic text - excerpt, questions for revision, a glossary or a word list with translation, vocabulary exercises, and some followed by activities and exercises that further exploit the topics. Vocabulary revision is based on gap-fill exercises, exercises requiring matching the word with its definition, accompanied by further comprehension questions and exercises. The materials comprise subject-specific topics, which were selected based on prior consultation with other ESP teachers as well as subject teachers.

The aim of this article is twofold: to provide some insights into the material design experience and offer practical methodological suggestions. The most essential aspects include: needs analysis, setting of objectives, decisions on syllabus design and lesson planning were considered and tried to incorporate activities focusing on the development of the mental lexicon of the learner.

During the drafting of the material for the content-based module, themes and corresponding topics of interest were identified in the initial stage. Then, a significant corpus of content materials was gathered to determine their appropriateness and applicability, followed by defining a coherent set of themes and topics for the core class. The next stage was specifying a time line and procedures for piloting, implementing, and evaluating the material. Then, the material was piloted in order to assess its advantages as well as the less successful components in order to use them to make improvements on the overall plan. Based on the pilot outcome changes were implemented keeping the students' complex needs in mind.

We have also incorporated the idea that it is important that teachers act as facilitators encouraging pupils to share their knowledge about the subject matter with the class and to actively participate in the learning process.

#### 4. COURSE MATERIAL EVALUATION RESULTS

Student feedback was an essential part of the research. Materials evaluation in general is an important part of materials selection, as well as the materials development process. In both cases, evaluation is primarily “concerned with relative merit. There is no absolute good or bad – only degrees of fitness for the required purpose” (Hutchinson and Waters, 1994: 96). An evaluation of published ESP materials will thus primarily serve to locate the materials that will best suit the learners' needs with regard to their future or current work area. When no suitable published materials are found, the evaluation of the existing materials can serve as a springboard for development of in-house produced materials. In-house produced, tailor-made materials themselves should also be evaluated in order to provide the basis for their revision with a view to improving their quality and their suitability to the target learners' needs.

The subjects of this research were students (preservice learners, levels B1, B2 and C1) with enough exposure to relevant terminology in their native language to understand the concepts and process elaborated within the given text (The origins of the European Coal

and Steel Community). The text was followed by a selected pertinent glossary providing Macedonian translation. After reading the text and completing the subsequent exercises the subjects were asked to fill in a short survey which contained questions related to the textbook's visual aspect (font, colour, etc.) and the exercises types. We have made a selection of the most frequently used exercises in this textbook: fill-in-the-blank, answer-the-questions and match-word-and-definition. After two weeks of their regular activities (not-related to the research) they were given a selection of vocabulary which they needed to translate and/or define providing useful acumens regarding the relations between the exercise type and vocabulary retention. The collected corpus was then processed with the aid of the statistical programme SPSS 11.0.

### 5. RESEARCH RESULTS - FINDINGS OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

The questionnaire brought about several beneficial insights. Namely, the textbook was accepted quite positively and the students were intrigued by the content of the given text. They found the glossary very useful, and there were virtually no problems with understanding the concepts and completing the exercises. The results from these exercises boosted positive learning attitudes and motivation and exceeded our expectations.

The questions within the first section of data collection were divided in two subgroups: questions related to form and questions related to content. The first subgroup was designed in order to provide insights on the form of the textbook, thus the subjects were asked to provide answers (multiple choice) on their font-size, colour (black-and white, multiple colours) and page format preferences. All subjects selected A4 as the preferred page size, and 71% of them favored black and white pages to coloured ones. Furthermore, 84% of the answers proposed Times New Roman as the most suitable text font for this type of a textbook.

The second subgroup of questions was designed to provide insights on students' attitudes towards specific types of exercises. Disappointingly, the corpus contained only information on subjects' preference and not the much-needed comments as to why they find a certain exercise useful or not. However, an interesting connection has been discovered between the language levels and exercise preferences. A total of 60% of B1 and C1, as well as 51% B2 leveled subjects prefer blank space exercises (as in the chart below), the rest of the group have selected matching (b) as their second favourite exercise, but surprisingly none of them favored the reading comprehension (c) exercise.

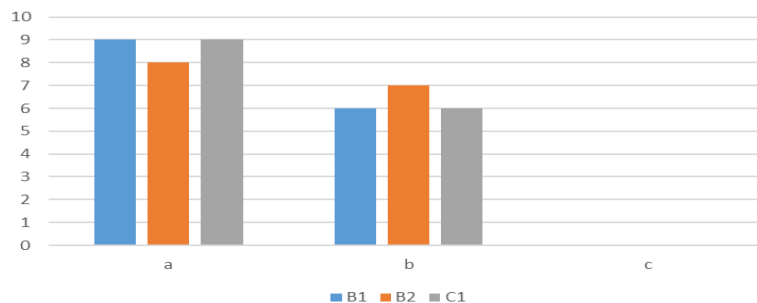


Chart 1. Students' preferences

## 6. FINDINGS OF THE VOCABULARY RETENTION EXERCISES

As mentioned previously, after two weeks of usual students' activities established as a classroom routine, they were asked to provide definition or synonyms for a selection of vocabulary elicited in the exercises. Again, a consistency was noticed between the language levels and results from the retention tests connected to the vocabulary acquired by different exercises.

Table 1 Comparison of results between students at B1 and B2 level

Exercise	Level	N	M	SD	T	P
Fill in the blanks	B1	15	24,2	23,22	-0,232	0,818
	B2	15	26,4	28,44		
Match words and definitions	B1	15	17,6	24,52	-4,279	0,000
	B2	15	50,6	17,04		
Reading comprehension	B1	15	19,8	16,73	-4,995	0,000
	B2	15	50,6	17,04		

The t-test for significant differences in the arithmetic mean (Table 1) suggests that there is no significant difference between the language levels and fill in the blanks exercise with regards to the vocabulary retention ( $t = -0,232$ , when  $p > 0,05$ ), which means that students with B1 and B2 language levels have equally mastered the intended vocabulary. In other words, this type of exercise is suitable for these two levels. However, a statistically significant difference ( $t = -4,279$ , when  $p < 0,01$ ) is present with the results on the second exercise (matching words with their definitions), meaning that Students at B2 level have better results than Students at B1 level, or in other words, this type of exercises are more suitable for students at B2 level. Similar to this, we can deduce that the third type of exercises function better at B2 language level since the statistical difference ( $t = -4,995$ , when  $p < 0,01$ ) regarding the third exercise (reading comprehension) is significant as well.

Table 2 Comparison of results between students at B2 and C1 level

Exercise	Level	N	M	SD	T	P
Fill in the blanks	B2	15	26,4	28,44	3,343	0,002
	C1	15	59,6	25,9		
Match the words with their definitions	B2	15	50,6	17,04	5,72	0,000
	C1	15	86,4	17,24		
Reading comprehension	B2	15	50,6	17,04	-2,477	0,02
	C1	15	33	21,60		

The t-test for significant differences in the arithmetic mean suggests that there is a statistically significant difference between the results of levels B2 and C1 in all exercises. Namely, the test value for the first exercise is  $t = 3,343$ , when  $p < 0,05$ , and the situation is similar with the second ( $t = 5,72$ , when  $p < 0,05$ ) and third exercise ( $t = -2,477$ , when  $p < 0,05$ ). In other words, the C1 leveled subjects had better results in all of the three exercises than B2 leveled subjects.

Table 3 Comparison of results between students at B2 and C1 level

Exercise	Level	N	M	SD	T	P
Fill in the blanks	B1	15	24,2	23,22	3,942	0,000
	C1	15	59,6	25,9		
Match the words with their definitions	B1	15	17,6	24,52	8,88	0,000
	C1	15	86,4	17,24		
Reading comprehension	B1	15	19,8	16,7	2,871	0,007
	C1	15	33	21,6		

The t-test for significant differences in the arithmetic mean suggests that there is a statistically significant difference between the results of levels B2 and C1 in all exercises. To be precise the t value for the first exercise is  $t=3,942$ , when  $p<0,05$ , the t value for the second exercise is  $t=8,88$ , when  $p<0,05$  parallel to  $t=2,871$ , when  $p<0,05$  for the third exercise. By analogy we can conclude that students at C1 level had better vocabulary retention results than students at B1 level.

As we can see from the statistical calculations above the first type of exercises (fill in the blank) is suitable for all of the tested levels. Furthermore, all of the subject expressed preferences when it came to it. The second (match the word with the definition) and the third (reading comprehension) type, however, enhance the long-term vocabulary retention of students at B2 level significantly more than the one B1 and students at C1 level. This does not mean that the results of B1 and C1 students were equally poor, it simply suggests that there is no significant statistical difference between the results.

## 7. CONCLUSION

When designing the materials, the authors of this course book were committed to students' academic content-learning needs as well as their language learning needs. At times, it was difficult to implement change, suggesting restructuring of the EAP curricula to prepare students for the content-learning and language, but it was worth the effort. Our experience indicated that teaching staff in departments related to foreign language instruction should identify improved instructional practices, as well as mechanisms for teamwork, and collaborative decision making.

The results of the student questionnaire provided insight into the strengths and weaknesses of the course and materials. The questionnaire results indicate that one of the most important advantages of the materials is the selection of topics, format and content corresponding to the students' needs. The type of the exercises analyzed correspond to levels B2 and C1, while B1 requires different approach as implied by the poorer vocabulary retention.

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that regardless of the amount of suitable quality readily available textbooks, ESP teachers can always opt for designing tailor-made, subject-specific materials, which can be used in combination with readily available textbooks. In both cases, when prepared well, tailor-made subjects specific materials will best fit the students' needs, and thus enhance their motivation for learning. At the same time, although it is very demanding and time-consuming, writing materials also allows the teacher to be actively involved in both developing and teaching courses.

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