

Designing Customized ESP Materials: Principles, Procedure, and Practice

Meera Srinivas

Abstract

Should ESP practitioners choose commercially published materials or design tailored materials to cater to the needs of a specific group of learners? The issue has been widely discussed in the literature, as English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses focus on the needs of learners in specific language contexts. While they are not mutually exclusive choices, the paper argues that the notion of ‘specificity’ that is at the core of ESP courses warrants the use of materials that are well-aligned to the needs of the learners and the learning objectives, and this is best achieved through customized materials using authentic sources. The paper presents a principled framework for designing customized ESP materials and exemplifies it through analysis of sample units to provide practical guidance to prospective ESP course designers and practitioners.

Keywords: specificity, tailored materials, learning needs, learning objectives, ESP courses

Introduction

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is a ‘materials-led movement’ as materials development is an indispensable element of ESP practice. ESP courses are taught to specific communities of learners with highly specialized language needs in specific professional and academic contexts through tailor-made instructional materials that provide the language source, support, stimulus, and motivation for learning. Materials are thus the cornerstone of ESP instruction and act as “the

interface between teaching and learning," "the point at which the course needs, objectives, and syllabuses are made tangible to both learners and teachers" (Hyland, 2006, p. 89). Since materials constitute a significant source of Input for the language exposure that ESP learners receive in the classroom, "teachers need to ensure that their materials relate as closely as possible to the target needs and learning profiles of their learners" (p. 93).

The above statement foregrounds the pivotal role of needs analysis in determining learners' target needs and relevant content. Needs analysis helps to identify the gap between the learners' current and target competencies and bridge it through needs-responsive instructional materials.

Given this specific focus, the question about the type of materials that would best serve teachers and learners in ESP instructional settings assumes significance. Should ESP practitioners choose published, readily available commercial textbooks or create tailored materials for a course? While it is possible to use a combination of published and specially designed materials, the paper argues that in the interest of achieving a high-degree of alignment between the course's objectives and its content, it is desirable to use materials that are specially designed for a course. This is especially true for 'narrow-angled' courses meant for specific learner groups with homogeneous linguistic needs, who study English for a specialized type of academic work (e.g. writing summaries, research articles, technical reports) or professional needs (negotiating a merger, producing software documentation, engaging in courtroom debate).

While there are plenty of commercial ESP textbooks in the market, they mainly focus on general academic reading and writing skills or are often limited to major ESP areas like Business, Banking, and Finance. For the wide range of contemporary professional and academic areas in which English is needed, there are fewer textbooks and resource materials as "publishers are naturally reluctant to produce materials for limited markets" (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p. 106). Besides, it is observed that commercial textbooks tend to be 'international' in orientation or focus on a specific country/region, and may not be relevant for local cultural contexts. They also negate the fundamental purpose of needs analysis-identifying learner needs, determining course objectives, and accessing

in-house materials like company brochures, everyday correspondence, recorded telephone conversations. It is widely believed that “in-house material is valuable as it is inevitably more precisely geared to the needs of learners than published material” (Sheerin, 1989, p. 25).

As published ESP textbooks do not cater to much subject specialism, and may not be appropriate in terms of the level of functions and skills, it seems unavoidable for the ESP teacher to also be a materials writer (Robinson, 1980). Such specificity warrants the design and use of customized materials aligned to learner needs and objectives of ESP courses.

Principles of Designing ESP Materials

According to Tomlinson (1998), materials writing is most effective when it is based on a thorough understanding of the needs of a particular group of students, i.e. their specific language difficulties, learning objectives, preferred learning styles. This principle is most relevant to ESP materials as they cater to learner needs through subject-specific carrier content and ‘real-life’ tasks that learners need to perform in the target language in context-specific situations. Such materials have a strong impact on the learners as they are perceived to be relevant and useful.

Another essential principle to be considered while designing materials is the present level of linguistic competence that learners possess and the target level that they have to reach in academic or work contexts. There should be a match between the linguistic content of a course and learners’ levels of competence (as identified in needs analysis) with a focus on context-specific topics and tasks that practise the target skills areas, for materials to be a real stimulus and source of learning

To cater to diverse learning styles and sustain learner motivation, it is also crucial for materials to have variety in terms of input texts (audio, visual), tasks and activities (a mix of pair work, group work and different types of activities), and flexibility for use with individual learners. Secondly, materials should have a clear and coherent unit structure to systematically organize the learning/teaching process and offer learners a sense of progression.

The Process of Designing ESP Materials

In the most common ESP course scenarios, when published materials

are available, they are selected according to requirements and implemented. Alternatively, if available materials are not suitable for a course, materials in other ESP areas are adapted creatively. However, the process of designing customized materials from scratch is a creative one as it involves systematic investigation, planning, and design, as elaborated below. The five-step procedure for creating ESP materials is adapted from 'A framework for materials writing' by Jolly and Bolitho (in Tomlinson, 1998, p. 112):

1. Investigating learner needs (the gap between current and target competencies, preferred styles of learning) using questionnaires, structured interviews, observation, authentic sample analysis etc.
2. Exploring the area of need to identify structures, lexis, communicative functions, skills, and competencies needed to perform a role in a particular work or academic context. This leads to the formulation of learning objectives and syllabus for the course.
3. Identifying contexts (academic, occupational, professional) and target situations, and selecting carrier content to activate learners' background knowledge, and relate what learners are learning to previous experiences in real-life academic or work situations—for instance, selecting authentic texts from business magazines, company websites for Management students.
4. Creating a mix of language-focused pedagogic exercises and a variety of real-life communication tasks. Practitioners should strive to design tasks that simulate the learners' real-life target situations as closely as possible to be of relevance and interest. It is also vital to write instructions for the tasks (rubric) clearly for effective implementation.
5. Sequencing tasks logically (from simple pedagogic form-focused activities to real-world tasks) and presenting them in graded units considering the layout, type, visuals, audio/ video support.

While the process might appear linear, in reality, it is a dynamic one, as implementation, feedback, and evaluation of materials invariably lead to revision and supplementation—it is ongoing and circular.

An attractive model that could serve as a guiding framework for designing tasks and activities in ESP contexts is discussed by Hutchinson

and Waters (1987, p. 112), which has four components—input, content focus, language focus, and task. The input provides a source for language learning, contains specialist language, and has a topic for communication. It can be a text, a video/audio clip, a picture, a product leaflet or a company email. Content focus refers to the carrier content of the course, e.g. medical texts, legal texts, etc. The content is used as a means to teach specialist language and communication. Language focus refers to the elements of language-structure, functions, lexis, discourse coherence that are part of the syllabus and objectives of the course. The task is the focus of the unit. The pedagogic activities help to build knowledge and competence that culminates in a communicative task. The interconnection between these elements creates a coherent unit.

Structure of a Typical ESP Unit

A typical ESP unit has the following structure:

- It is organized around a topic related to the subject specialism, or a genre, communicative function, language skill that is at the focus of the course.
- Objectives are stated at the beginning as learning outcomes, signposting to teachers and learners.
- Starter (an authentic text, a comic strip, a set of pictures, an audio/video clip etc.) serves as a lead-in to the topic, activating the learners' mind, arousing interest.
- It is followed by a chain of form-focused pedagogic activities (fill in the blanks, match the following, sentence/paragraph completion exercises) related to specialist vocabulary, language structures, and sub-skills that aim to build restricted language competence in preparation for the final communication task that promotes language use in target situations.
- The tasks are arranged in a logical sequence, from simple guided exercises to controlled practice activities leading to freer practice tasks, facilitating coherence and learning.

To exemplify the principles, procedures, and the process involved in designing ESP materials, two sample units that were designed as a part of the MA TESL programme at English and Foreign Languages University are analysed below.

Unit Analysis-1

A basic level course in oral communication skills was designed for waiters of a high-end café.

Unit Objectives

To help learners (the serving staff) use polite language in their interactions with customers for

- greeting and welcoming customers
- describing the food items in the menu using food-specific vocabulary
- taking orders and helping to choose from the menu

Starter

Any Youtube video showing an authentic conversation between a waiter and customers.

Commentary

The video creates the context and setting for the unit as it makes the scene come 'alive' for the learners and brings a holistic experience of the language used in such settings. It shows examples of polite use of language with customers and sets the tone for the unit.

Task 1

Two form-focused activities are used: the first one (1a) focuses on *word order* in sentences and questions and learners rearrange the words in the jumbled-up sentences and questions like *I/help /can /how/ you/ hello, Order/ you/ are/ to/ ready* in the correct order. In the second one, (1b) learners slot the reordered sentences into different *functional* categories, in different boxes provided. The categories are taking orders, giving feedback, greeting and welcoming customers, functions that are relevant in the context.

Commentary

These are chain activities, as completion of task (1b) is based on answers to task (1a). They focus on building restricted socio-linguistic competence to communicate with prospective customers.

Task 2

The Input is an extract from a book titled *Restaurant Service Basics*, (Dahmer & Kahl, 2009) and the text describes different cooking methods—fried, baked, grilled, poached, steamed.

Step 1: The learners read the text, understand the differences between ways of cooking, and in the follow-up task, mention the appropriate action verb for the process that the teacher describes.

Step 2: The learners study the menu and determine which preparation methods are used in preparing food items on the menu. Then, they prepare a list of food items based on the method of preparation, for example sandwiches—grilled, cakes-baked in groups.

Commentary

The input is authentic and is used to teach *explicitly* topic-specific lexis as action verbs and nominal phrases (NPs) related to the food menu. The practice activity helps to consolidate the understanding of words in a context and leads to the following task.

Task 3

This is a paired activity. Information about certain food items (ingredients, methods of preparation, accompaniments) is provided. Learners combine the information and prepare a short description for each food item. Then working in pairs, the learners perform a role play as waiter and customer and describe the food items in the menu-like grilled salmon with dill sauce, roast beef with vegetables, apple pie with cream, in a similar way. Then they switch roles and practise the role play.

Commentary

There is a clear link between tasks 1, 2 and 3. In task 3, an application activity, learners use action verbs and NPs learned from tasks 1 and 2 to describe food items to the customers. The role-play is a useful activity to practice pre-specified language and understand its contextualized use in real-world situations.

Task 4

This is an interactive task. Step 1: Each learner is given a placard containing a question or an answer to a question. The questions-answers model a conversation between a customer and a waiter. Some of the questions are: *Would you like to order, sir? How was the food?* and the answer: *We liked the food, and the service was prompt.* The learners go around the classroom and find the person who has the answer to their question or a question corresponding to the answer in their placard. Step 2: Once the learners find their partners and form a pair, the next task is to figure out the correct sequence of the pairs (questions-answers). The teacher asks each pair to read out their question and answer and writes it on the board. When the questions-answers are put up, the class works out the sequence of the conversation with support from the teacher. Step 3: The teacher does a model reading of the conversation using proper stress and intonation. Following that, learners do a role-play in pairs and practise the scripted conversation.

Commentary

The interactive discourse-level task gives learners practice in using the sentences and question forms learned in task 1 for a real language function, *to place an order*. Identifying the sequence of questions and answers in the conversation shows an understanding of language functions and form, and discourse structure. The role-play helps learners practise the language

and understand its use in real communication. *This is a controlled practice activity.*

Task 5

This is a consolidation task where learners use the language inputs from previous tasks to enact a role-play between a customer and the serving staff covering the following topics/language functions:

1. Welcoming the customers
2. Taking the customer's order
3. Recommending a few signature dishes from the menu using specific food-related vocabulary

Commentary

The final task helps learners practise limited language-vocabulary, language functions and structures-learned in the unit to communicate effectively with customers in a restaurant. *This gives scope for producing English in a specific context.*

The tasks in Unit-1 are organized around essential communicative functions that play a crucial role in a restaurant setting. The focus is on building knowledge of context-specific vocabulary and relevant structures through *explicit task-based language teaching*, rather than through incidental learning. Role-plays are an essential activity in oral communication courses as they help learners practise the restricted language competence in a context. This course uses topic-specific authentic input materials like cookbooks, videos, word lists from Internet sources to augment the learning experience. The tasks are logically arranged in terms of cognitive linguistic complexity and progress from knowledge building to controlled practice and use, to conversation practice and production.

Unit Analysis-2

A narrow-angled specific-purpose course in presentation skills was designed for trainee Chartered Accountants.

Unit Objectives

The unit's focus is to help learners

- understand types of visuals used in presentations
- create visuals (e.g. graphs) from available data
- interpret and summarize the information in presentations, using specialist terms and expressions.

Starter

It has two comic pictures—A and B—which show an audit committee meeting in progress in an office, a topic related to the profession. One student is given picture A and the other is given picture B. Working in pairs, the students find out the differences in the pictures by describing them to each other.

Commentary

The visuals are relevant and arouse learner interest. The information gap activity stimulates a conversation between the students in English because there is a genuine need to communicate and shows how an image can be described through language, leading to the unit's main objective, the visualization of data and interpretation.

Task-1

The task has 3 parts to it: In the first part, input is provided in a table showing different types of visuals like a bar graph, line graph, pie chart. The table has three columns: the first shows the type of graph, the second, the purpose for using a particular type of graph, and the third, the phrases that are commonly used for describing the graph.

In the second part, the students are given four situations where they are required to create a visualization of data for their presentation. Students have to refer to the table and identify the graph that is best suited for each situation. In the third part, the focus is on the phrases associated with the types of graphs. Again, a few situations are given in the form of statements. Students are asked to fill in the gaps in the statements using appropriate phrases from column 3 of the table.

Commentary

This is a well-structured task that progresses logically. Part-1 provides the input, part-2 helps learners understand and apply the information to different situations, and in part-3, the focus is on the communicative phrases that are used to interpret graphs. These are chain tasks, and the specially created input is exploited effectively to raise awareness about types and purposes of visuals. It lays the foundation for the tasks that follow.

Task-2

In this task, the input is a bar graph showing the current assets of three companies. The first part of the task has a few statements based on the graph with blanks. Learners have to read the graph, and based on the analysis of the graph and using the phrases provided in a box as support, fill in the gaps. Part 2 of the activity is a group activity in which learners convert the data presented in the input graph into tabular form and/or suggest at least one other way to present the data in a visual form.

Commentary

The task aims to provide practice of linguistic phrases to interpret data given in a graphical form and transferring it into different presentation formats (an information transfer activity). There is also a gap-filling activity that reinforces the knowledge of terms used in comparing data from different companies. This forms the basis for the following task.

Task-3

Four tables containing income statements from annual audit reports of two companies are used as input. Each group is given a table that is not shared with other groups. In groups, the learners study the table given to them, discuss what kind of visual is most effective in representing the data, and prepare them.

Commentary

This task uses relevant in-house materials like company financial statements and graphs. The texts have specialist words and phrases. In the process of reading and interpreting the information in the tables and converting them into other visual forms, the knowledge of specialist financial terms is reinforced. It gives additional practice in data interpretation in a practical setting and fosters group skills that are essential in work environments.

The first three tasks are interconnected and provide structured practice in data visualization, interpretation, and transfer.

Task-4

An interactive vocabulary game that focuses on understanding the key terms used in Finance. Flashcards with terms related to Finance, are used as input. Each card has a word written at the top with four synonyms of the word listed below. Some of the words in the flashcards are: *risk, capital, outflow, assets, revenue, collateral, holdings, equity*. Participants are divided into two teams, and each team sends one player at a time to pick a card at random from the shuffled deck. The player has to describe the word written at the top of the card, using only English as the medium of communication, without using any of the four words written below the target word.

Commentary

The game helps in learning the key concepts or NPs used in Finance in a stress-free environment. It consolidates learners' understanding of the key terms as they explain the conceptual meaning to others and promote practice in speaking in a controlled way, paving the way for the free production task.

Task-5

The graphs prepared by the groups in task-3 are the input for the task. The

groups exchange the graphs. Each group studies and interprets the graph without looking at the original table of information and then presents a summary of the information orally, using appropriate specialist terms and complete sentences to structure a mini oral discourse.

Commentary

In the final task, learners use their knowledge of graphs and technical vocabulary for a discourse-level activity. The task gives learners further practice in analysing and interpreting information and presenting key information to an audience coherently and fluently. There is scope for using specialist vocabulary and for free language production (speaking).

Unit 2 has a singular aim and narrow focus and develops the analytical and interpretation skills through well-structured activities that are arranged logically to develop the target competence. The tasks progress from awareness-raising to controlled practice, consolidation, and free production, giving learners adequate scaffolding and scope to reinforce their subject knowledge and language competence. The use of authentic materials, like company annual reports and financial asset statements from Indian companies, lend specificity to the content making learning relevant and interesting.

Conclusion

The unit analysis demonstrates that the process of creating customized ESP materials for a course involves considerable planning, effort and creativity to closely align them to the course objectives and cater to the principle of specificity. It is often described as ‘time-consuming’. Nevertheless, it is a rewarding experience for teachers and practitioners as there is a sense of ownership of materials and greater motivation to implement the course. It is also a means for professional development. Further, access to internet resources (a rich source of ideas), and authentic online inputs (videos, audio clips, pictures, texts), facilitate the process of materials writing and revising (which needs training and practice), making it a rich learning experience for course designers.

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Meera Srinivas is a Professor in the Department of Materials Development, Testing and Evaluation at EFL University. Her academic interests include ESL Materials Development, ESP, ESL Writing and Assessment.

meerasrinivas@efluniversity.ac.in