

Revisiting Materials for Teaching Languages for Specific Purposes

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ABSTRACT

Teaching materials in languages for specific purposes have evolved in the last few years dramatically. The Internet currently plays a significant role in such development and has permitted both a wider range of resources and its free availability almost anywhere in the World. This paper presents a selection of different types of recent materials for English for Specific Purposes. The paper begins by defining ESP. Then it approaches how materials should shape the student's own learning, how materials should be selected according to the different skills and then emphasizes the importance of the Internet as a source of materials. The paper concludes with a set of ideas for the future development of ESP materials. The final goal of this paper is to provide the readers with valuable tools that can enhance their teaching through accessible means.

Keywords: ESP; materials; Internet; organisation; classification.

INTRODUCTION

Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) can be defined as the teaching of a language as a second or foreign language for certain groups of students to whom the syllabus, tasks and methodology is especially tailored to their interests and needs (see Needs Analysis and Syllabus Design for Language for Specific Purposes). In this sense, according to Harding (2007) the needs and subjects would shape the materials of the different categories of LSP (i.e. English for business, English for maritime studies, and so on). Overall, materials for LSP can be divided into three main branches: science and technology, business and economics, and social sciences and the humanities. However, this categorisation is flexible and certainly adaptable to different students' groups (Figure 1).

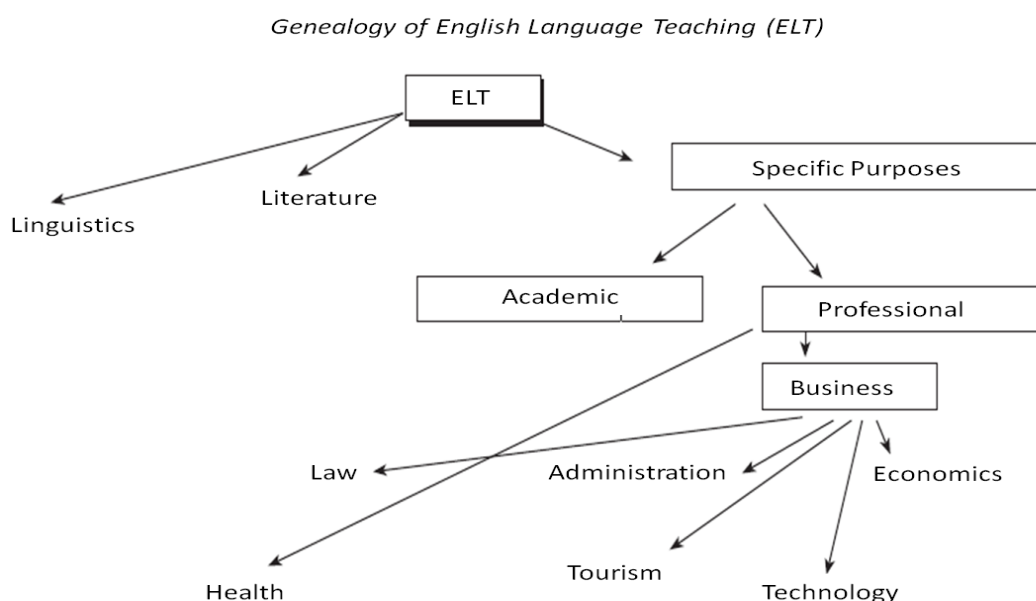


FIGURE 1. The tree of ELT/ESP (Varela Méndez, 2007).

Most authors in the field of materials design agree that the main feature of LSP is the account of the centrality of the learner's needs analysis (Sysoyev, 2000). Methodologies and materials are usually adapted to particular groups of learners, and to each learner's needs. In this sense, student's needs can be understood as the language knowledge that the learner requires for professional development, the language and content knowledge that needs to be added or reincorporated to the learner's knowledge and the learner's desires of language or content. As a consequence, different target audiences may lead to the development and use of a variety of teaching materials emphasizing different instructional techniques and teaching approaches such as lexical, communicative, task based or problem solving.

Therefore, there are three main factors that need to be addressed when designing LSP materials: the criteria for implementing or modifying materials, the subjective criteria on what teachers and students want from that material, and the objective criteria which is what the material really offers (Hutchinson & Waters, 2009). As a consequence, some of the factors that shape the kind of materials used in LSP are: 1) topic or specialty 2) learners' situation 3) general and specific proficiency in the language of study at entry and exit levels 4) the students' previous educational and cultural experience 5) types of skills to be developed (whether reading or writing or speaking or listening) 6) expected outcomes of learning goals. Materials usually include textbooks, audio supported materials, computer software, Internet resources and visual aids. Tomlinson, has described positive trends in materials development as those that lead to self 'discovering the language, using corpuses for their development, use extensive reading, personalize the process and experience spoken grammar in use' (Tomlinson, 2008: p. 8). Another factor that LSP materials users and designers need to consider is relation to the continuum of choosing-adapting-developing materials. The most relevant linguistic aspects to LSP are lexical items, language forms, and a topic for conversations while trying to integrate all four skills with authentic texts and audiovisual media. Indeed, authentic materials need to introduce information in shape of accessible input that is not specifically aimed to EFL learners but current specialists on apprentices of certain fields (such as medicine, engineering or others). These aspects should relate to the students' experience and background, and include non linguistic aspects and background information considering the students' capacity for analysis and synthesis both for

the topic and the language. The challenge resides in accounting for these aspects while making materials appropriate for communication, adequate to the students, and, whenever possible; include tasks that can be useful for the students' professional careers (for example, online bookings for Travel & Tourism learners, García Laborda, 2002; 2003). According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), 'the language and content focused are drawn from the input [...] in order to do the task' (pp. 109). Harding summarizes these recommendations in just three simple tips:

- "Use contexts, texts and situations from the students' subject area. Whether they are real or simulated, they will naturally involve the language the students need.
- Exploit authentic materials that students use in their specialism or vocation – and don't be put off by the fact that it may not look like 'normal English'.
- Make the tasks authentic as well as the texts. Get the students doing things with the material that they actually need to do in their work". (Harding, 2007, pp. 10–11)

Besides, students should find the materials challenging, interesting and "usable" to call their attention and motivate them to learn through their interaction, which is one of the principles of social constructivist approach to language learning (Wilson & Yang, 2007) and more specifically in computer assisted language learning (García Laborda, 2009). Consequently, LSP materials should have rich input and include the language structures and content information to make tasks as realistic for the learners' language goals as possible. Whenever possible, materials should aim to be used in the students' profession in the form of manuals, listening activities, web quests, or websites which may come from books or internet resources currently used in the profession. When real materials are not available, adaptations and simplifications by eliminating dense contents (Swales, 2009) are desirable to make texts 'semi-authentic'. These changes can be done by slightly modifying the style, register and vocabulary. As suggested, today the internet offers a variety of sources and materials that can be used to address the four skills in the teaching of LSP. Teachers may find specialized websites, podcasts and many other internet resources that can provide them with audiovisual prompts and content to enrich, adapt and develop materials for their courses.

MATERIALS FOR A LEARNER-CENTERED APPROACH

The first step towards finding good materials may be choosing the right textbook. Textbooks give a solid framework for classroom development and can be useful for novices or teachers who may just have begun classes in a new LSP field. Textbooks, especially for business English, may also include a number of additions such as the teacher's book, resource pack with photocopiable materials, grammar booklets and so on. Today the variety of LSP textbooks is broader than in the past. LSP textbooks are common and are usually divided into the following categories: English for Academic Purposes, Content Integrated Language Learning (Content and Language Integrated Learning) (CLIL), English for the health profession, English for business, English for tourism, English for the military, English for technical purposes and engineering, English for aviation and English for computers. Some textbooks or materials are available from various international publishers but materials ultimately need to be produced, evaluated and adapted to the different learning contexts whether classes, courses or distance learning. As Tomlinson (2001) has explained, it is necessary to find interfaces in materials production, adaptation and evaluation between teachers, in their own classrooms, and materials designers for commercial purposes considering the students' present situation and their target situation after using those materials. In this sense, the key issue is whether commercial materials will fit and be enough

in number and quality to cope with the students' needs, proficiency, learning styles and other variables (McGrath, 2002), and also their degree of authenticity (Frendo, 2007). In this sense, Tomlinson suggests using a text-driven approach in which it is necessary "to start by finding written and spoken texts with the potential for affective and cognitive engagement" (Tomlinson, 2006: 3) in the topic, situation and also with the desired functions and skills to be developed. Additionally, the Internet is currently playing a significant role in both in-person and distance learning, feeding both students and teachers with the appropriate texts that may be of interest for their learners. The Internet provides the teacher with the opportunities to find materials with the appropriate language and content that can be most adequate for the LSP student. Additionally, some of the best publishers may also have additional online websites to support their own commercial materials. These websites usually include contextualized lessons, games, readings, realia and other elements. In addition, these websites may be open and be used by practitioners in the field. For example, some websites (shown below) may provide not only glossaries, scripts, some trialing contents and even interactive activities which are not only good support for teachers and students using their methods but also a commercial call for prospective customers).

<http://elt.oup.com/teachers/oefc/?cc=global&sellLanguage=en>

http://www.oup.com/elt/global/products/oefc/tourism3/a_languagespot/oefc_tourism_gr01/

The fact that LSP is highly specialized implies that materials and lessons would be contextualized in the areas of which the teacher, especially the novice ones, knows little about. However, on the students' part, their expectations would be not only linguistic but also content related, and thus the classroom pedagogy has to mimic experiences in the field. When these aspects are met in the course, students may feel both instrumentally motivated and also satisfied with their own progress

<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/blogs/christinasargsyant/difficultiesteaching-English-specific-purposes>).

LANGUAGE AND SKILLS CONSIDERATIONS FOR CHOOSING MATERIALS

In LSP, language and register presented as input in the classroom are driven by the analysis of the target situation and the students' needs. Teachers need to be also aware of the students' desire and what really moves them to learn. In many specialized fields, the key issue is what kind of language should be taught in the classroom – not only what the teacher can teach the students, but also what can be extracted from working with materials in the foreign language. In this context, instructors may have to decide if or when to use teacher (or publisher) created materials and when to use real ones (Bojovic, 2006).

Traditionally, real materials were printed such as magazines, manuals, bulletins, and brochures. Today Internet websites may include all these and combine them with videos or listening files which enrich the language input and also give a different perspective of the topic. For instance, a good website for tourism (for example, <http://www.visitflorida.com/>) may include reading materials (such as articles or written advertisements or hotel descriptions) and video. Thus, teachers working with this type of website may be able to enrich input by combining different sources. Naturally, pre-reading or pre-listening activities may be necessary but the combination of image and writing enriches the learning (Hristova, 1990). A second matter may be the need to customize real materials to the students' reality and needs. In this case, the adaptation may be through an accompanying handout or through the preparation of totally new materials based on the real ones. This is plausible for written material but it seems harder when using different supports such as video or audio taped materials. Teachers creating their own materials may need to devote more time than those who use ready-made, published or real materials. In this case, Frendo (2007) recommends

using corpora and computer based concordance programs to enrich the input. Garcia Laborda (2009) further suggests that students also help to develop teaching and learning materials.

THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER AND METHODOLOGY

As opposed to general English learning, some LSP courses may not have a formal final evaluation and the way in which learners measure their own learning may be through their own sense of progress and personal achievement according to their needs. Thus, materials need to be balanced between language skills and content learning. Learners may be mostly interested in their surrounding reality and workplace. Practical matters that can be applicable to their working world need to be considered as the cornerstone to develop materials and alternative methods of evaluation. Since real or created simulations, role plays and case studies are commonly used in LSP, teachers tend to use real materials. Some courses may be intensive while others may be extensive; they can also be part or full time but usually tend to be placed either in colleges or language centers or in the workplace. When the latter occurs, learners may have to attend classes during their free time or after work and will be capable of doing little if any work at home. Thus, online or other easily accessible materials need to be at reach to make learning more convenient. Countries where printed materials are common may rely more on textbooks when available (some fields lack the specialized books but they are common in business, tourism and other fields) while in some other places resources are scarce. However, the generalization of the Internet has facilitated large quantities of materials and readings that are produced worldwide.

THE INTERNET AS A SOURCE OF LSP MATERIALS

The Internet has changed LSP dramatically. LSP materials that were difficult to find until recently (especially in some countries) are now readily accessible and usually free. The Internet is also a valuable tool for student cooperation and communication (social use of the web) and ‘technology offers new ways for practicing language and assessing performance’ (Dudeney & Hocly, 2007: 8). Additionally, the internet is highly motivating (Wu & Marek, 2010). The internet now offers a wide variety of materials [Figure 2] that include the following:

a. *Podcasts*: Websites that include digital listening and video materials. Specific LSP podcasts are scarce but teachers may be able to do the necessary adaptation, exercises and pre/post listening activities to be able to use them to enrich their classes (Kavaliauskienė, 2008). Podcasts are especially interesting because many ESP courses may not be capable of providing the students with enough audio input in class (especially in non-curricular classes) (Bjorge, 2010).

b. *Video sharing websites*: Websites that include videos with a variety of topics (such as Google Video or You Tube). Videos may deal with almost any topic and when used conveniently by the teacher become an excellent source of input, especially when enhanced by image. The use of video has become increasingly popular among ESL practitioners because it permits dealing with a wide range of vocabulary, structures and contents that teachers may ignore but are desirable to be addressed in the classroom through debates and simple exercises. Additionally, Video sharing websites can replace podcasts more efficiently and are also available for autonomous learning. The only question is whether teachers should prepare their use in advance since they are generally based on the real use of the language (no simplifications), and pre-watching and post-watching activities should lead to students integrating the new content and also learning the language (Kim & McDonough, 2011).

c. Chat, e-pals and Foros: Teachers in LSP may want to get in touch with other institutions for speaking and written synchronous (Chat), asynchronous (e-pals) and a combination (foros) of communication through different means.

d. Blogs for ESP: These are websites to share ideas. Generally, they are moderated and run by an individual or institution that moderates the entries (<http://classroomblogenglish.blogspot.com/>). The possibility to integrate media and written materials make them very valuable (Shih, 2010) especially for informal assessment (Gleaves, Walker & Grey, 2007) because they can be used as e-portfolios (Baturay y Daloglu, 2010, Wang, 2010) and are more attractive for most students who can access their classmates blogs and leave comments or suggestions for improvement (Shih, 2010).

e. Dictionaries: Some English for specific purposes dictionaries are available online for free (http://www.te4be.com/pages/mat4learn/links/links_esp.htm).

The benefits of some online dictionaries and glossaries are that they can address the users' needs and specific field, i.e.

English for aviation

(<http://www.datwiki.net/>); http://www.alphadictionary.com/directory/Specialty_Dictionaries/Aviation/),

English for the military (http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/dod_dictionary/),

and English for business (<http://www.foreignword.com/dictionary/business/>).

According to Al-Shehri & Gitsaki (2010), online dictionaries facilitate the acquisition of reading skills especially when using an integrated reading system.

f. Wikipedia: This site has some good articles, which may be helpful in ESP. It is also a very good source of input and provides writing models for academic and scientific writing (Tardy, 2010).

g. Other online reference tools such as concordancers, translators and Encyclopedias are available through the internet and may help in LSP teaching and learning. For Kaur & Hegelheimer (2005), concordancing in the classroom is helpful because “language is presented in an authentic context; learners are able to examine a key word in the context of a string of sentences which can exemplify the use of that particular word.” Likewise, encyclopaedias help to solve questions by introducing additional simplified input and contextual information. Besides, some online encyclopaedias can simplify the language (<http://kids.britannica.com/>, <http://www.4to40.com/encyclopedia/index.asp?id=10>) and thus make it more accessible to learners with different competence levels. Therefore, both dictionaries and encyclopedias empower the students' capacity of learning and facilitate the appropriate searching (for information) strategies (McCorduck, 1997).

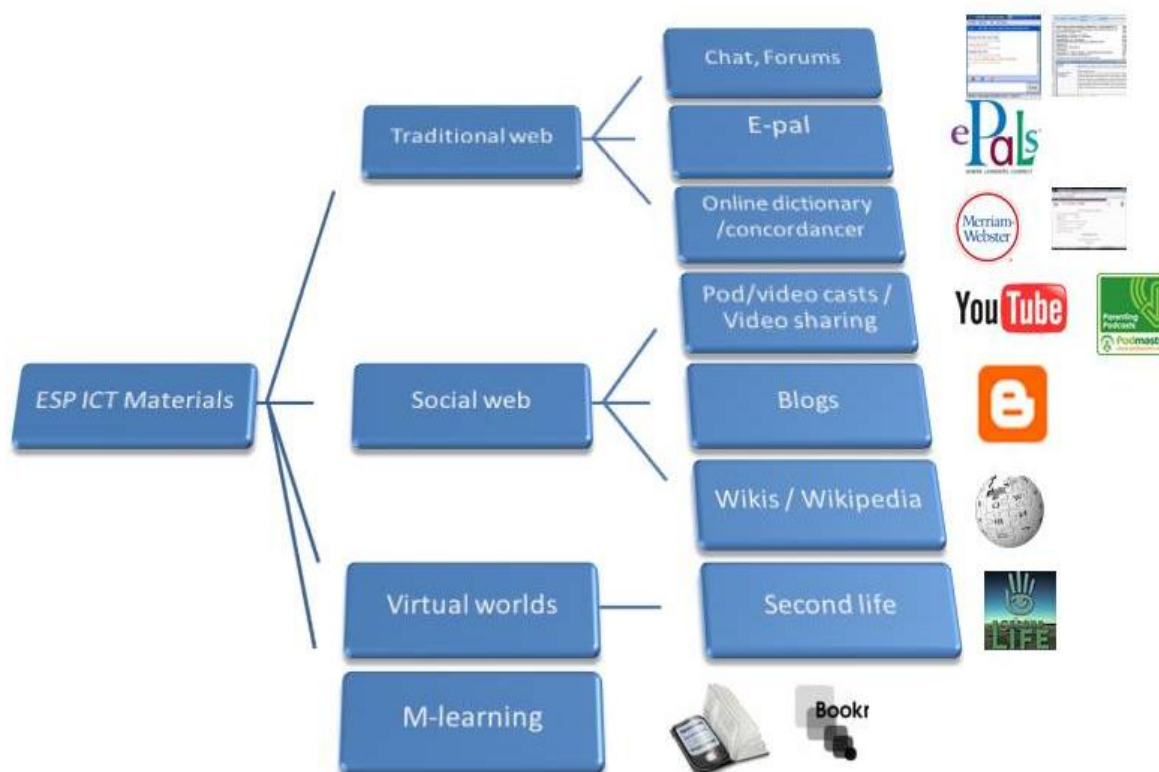


FIGURE 2. A classification of ICT based ESP materials

M-LEARNING MATERIALS

Another source of materials that is progressively acquiring its own body is m-learning materials (Figure 3). M-learning is especially relevant because a number of ESP students do not have the time to study while commuting from their residence to their work. It is this spare time that they can use to revise the contents for their classes or even do their homework using mobile devices. There is still a real need to develop materials for mobile devices, especially for mobile phones. Reading can be difficult in mobile devices but cellular phones are excellent means for speaking and, especially, for listening activities. In that sense, mobile phones with connection to the Internet can access podcasts and, in this way, students can benefit from listening to a number of audio recorded sources like BBC podcast science (www.bbc.co.uk/podcasts/series/scia or www.sciencefriday.com).



FIGURE 3. Adaptation of the different types of question for ESP testing and m-learning. Multiple choice tasks.

LEARNING THROUGH VIRTUAL WORLDS

The most important aspect of learning through virtual worlds is that students will learn by experiencing (Wang et al., 2009; Peterson, 2010; Jauregui et al, 2011). However, the major problem is that operating in virtual worlds requires time and not all the students may be inclined to use their time in that way even when virtual worlds can be extremely motivating for any learner (Peterson, 2010).

EVALUATING MATERIALS

Materials must always be in a process of revision. There are a number of reasons which require teachers to be constantly revising materials:

- *Contents:* The contents may be obsolete and have become inaccurate so their students may consider them of little professional use;
- *Availability:* The online resources may not be available anymore because they need a valid registration, because they have been migrated or because the resource does not exist any longer;
- *Internal changes:* Websites are modified constantly so one that may be useful at certain point may be changed in time and the teacher may not find it of interest any more (sometimes, the contrary can also happen and new parts or tasks are incorporated so the website is even better for teaching and learning);
- *Students' attitudes:* There may be personal reasons related to computer use that may recommend changing the materials in use such as ergonomics, user identity, perceived necessity, functional procedures and others.

In general, the first three factors have traditionally been considered as constraints in e-learning as well as in the use of materials but the last one has been left aside because it is

difficult to obtain reliable data. However, students' attitudes towards the use of certain materials may explain why students may be reluctant to use certain ESP materials (or, in a broader sense, general e-learning materials), and therefore prevent learners from learning autonomously (García Laborda, Bejarano & Simons, in press).

CONCLUSIONS: FUTURE ISSUES IN LSP MATERIALS DESIGN AND USE

It seems difficult to foresee the future of materials in ESP. Certainly, the Internet and social networking sites can be seen as facilitating tools that still need to be explored. Learning in virtual worlds as simulators of LSP contexts is an attractive approach to training in real contexts. For Gonzalez and St. Louis (2008), the future of learning remains in those possibilities offered by the Web 2.0. Presently, the Internet is seen as a vehicle promoting worldwide accessibility of LSP and, more important too, it might be able to facilitate knowledge delivery in places where limited funds may make it otherwise difficult.

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Electronic resources

These are only a few examples of an increasing list of online materials for ESP.

Introduction to a definition of English for Specific Purposes

<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/transform/teachers/specialist-areas/english-specific-purposes>

An accompanying website for business classes <http://www.businessenglishonline.net/>

A general website for teaching business English

http://esl.about.com/od/englishforbusinesswork/English_for_Business_Work_and_other_Special_Purposes.htm

Journals online (free full access)

ESP World www.esp-world.info/

Iberica <http://www.aelfe.org/?s=presentacio>

Asian English for Specific Purposes Journal <http://www.asian-espjournal.com/index.php>

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