

TEACHING RESOURCES FOR ESP- FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

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Abstract

This paper tries to identify the standard structure that most of the ESP books follow and examines the extent to which it meets the ESP learners' needs. It analyzes their content accessibility to undergraduates and their potential to develop the communicational skills that the future professionals are expected to master once they enter the labor market. The aim of this paper is to propose some ways of using these resources to their full potential, which does not mean narrowing down to a single textbook, but continuously supplementing, combining and updating these resources in order to make them highly motivating for the students and thus to engage them in a process of learning that bridges the gap between theory and practice from its outset.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes, learning, textbooks, communicational skills

The analysis of several ESP course-books has revealed that they generally follow the same structure focused on developing the four basic language skills: listening, reading, writing and speaking. These are the skills that are generally assessed by any language test and they represent the criteria according to which the language level of graduates is established. Thus ESP courses follow the same structure of any general English textbook and from a distant perspective it may seem that teaching specialized terminology vaguely differs from teaching general language. However, once a learner takes up a course on specialized terminology things change both for the learner who is not familiar with this language and for the teacher who has to face the challenge of cleverly applying his teaching skills to an area where he does not function as a specialist. The question arising here is what kind of materials the ESP teacher should choose and what teaching methods and strategies he should apply in order to render them in an accessible way and to meet his learners' needs.

At this stage several issues occur and they mainly revolve round the learners' profile. No matter the status of learners, students or professionals, the teacher should first give them a placement test and establish their level. Then, according to their specific needs, the teacher can decide whether they should take up a general English course in order to reach the required level for taking up an ESP course or not. This is actually the situation with the first year students who enter university with different language training backgrounds, hence with different language needs (not all the first year students are at the B1 level which is required by the Common European Framework of Reference for Language). Consequently, they need to upgrade their listening, speaking, reading and writing skills for general English first and, only then, they can be required to develop their language abilities in an ESP context to finally reach the 'Vantage' (B2) or 'Effective Operational Proficiency' (C1) levels that are covered for example by ILEC (International Legal English Certificate), an internationally recognized Cambridge ESOL examination.

Consistent with what we have stated above, if one looks at the typical abilities expected from a candidate taking an ESP test, the conclusion is that such examinations on specialized language are largely focused on the language skills followed by the general

English tests. To quote a few required by the ILEC exam: for *listening* and *speaking* the candidates can ask for factual information and understand the answer; can ask questions, for example for clarification, while following a lecture, talk or presentation; can express own opinion; can present arguments and give a simple, prepared presentation on a familiar topic; for *reading* and *writing* they can understand the general meaning of non-routine correspondence; can understand the general meaning of a report even if the topic is not predictable; can write a simple report of a factual nature and begin to evaluate, advise, etc.; can write non-routine correspondence where this is restricted to matters of fact (ILEC Guidelines, p.26). Therefore, from the point of view of developing the four essential language skills, the available ESP books fully meet the learners' needs. Courses like *Introduction to International Legal English* by Amy Krois Lindner and Matt Firth, *International Legal English* by Amy Krois Lindner cover the four main skills that are also required for the ILEC exam- Listening, Reading, Speaking and Writing.

However, reaching the Vantage level (B2) in a specialized field requires specialist knowledge in that very specific area of knowledge. This generates problems both for the students and for the language instructors. They both lack professional knowledge in that specific domain and the role of the teacher becomes crucial as he is expected to identify the right teaching materials and methods in order to turn the student from a general language user into a specialized language user.

In the case of first year students the situation becomes even more problematic because despite being vantage or proficient users of general English they are faced with a specialized language they lack knowledge of in their maternal language (even native speakers have difficulties in understanding specialized terminology such as the language of law). This drawback can be partly overcome by considering students' needs. Even though they haven't actually shaped their expectations from an ESP course, the teacher may apply a needs' analysis questionnaire and the questions should refer not only to their favorite topics but also to the way of rendering them in the class (presentations, debates, discussions, role-plays etc.). If these are taken into consideration when designing the ESP material, then one may say that the teacher has reached halfway to designing a successful course.

When the instructor designs the teaching materials, apart from his students' needs, he also has to meet the employers' expectations from the university graduates, which are focused both on plain English and ESP. The employers' initial requirements regarding plain English presuppose students training from a communicative approach so that once these future professionals enter the world of work they could immediately apply their general language skills without any additional training. In practice these 'by default' skills are expected to be supplemented by specialized language skills as the employees have to deal with authentic specialized materials and real-life situations in their specific working environment.

Thus the language instructor finds himself on a dividing line between theory and practice and his role is to find ways of connecting the two elements of the divide. He has to constantly adjust the course materials to the labor market needs and he can solve the conundrum of choosing the proper teaching materials by focusing on several aspects of the specialized language: the analysis and production of authentic specialized texts, language functions common to the specialized area, vocabulary learning that goes beyond mere

terminology acquisition and considers larger chunks of language rendered in authentic and recurrent contexts.

The selection of the written and spoken texts has to cover a wide range of the text types in use in the specialized area. For instance in the case of Legal English this should include texts which lawyers have to produce, read and listen to, such as letters of advice, proposals, interviews or presentations. The students have to be encouraged to identify the language functions in each text and once equipped with a kind of template of a common specialized text they have to move to the next level of instruction: they have to produce a similar text either by writing a letter or email, by taking part in a role-play interview or by discussing a legal issue, for example.

While these models of communication focus on improving the knowledge of specialized vocabulary, the teacher should also include exercises that center on common phrases and word combinations that are not specialized terms but are essential in achieving a successful communication. What is more, even though the communicational aspect has the upper hand in the modern process of learning, the teacher should also make sure that the students are fully equipped with the elements that give consistency in the production of discourses such as grammatical correctness, word choice and structure elements.

The courses that have been previously mentioned follow both the general and specialized language perspective; moreover, even though their focus is on the communicational approach, they also include sections that explain difficult language as well as unusual or difficult grammar structures because their goal is to enable the student to effectively and correctly communicate in the specialized domain of law.

Another difficulty that the ESP teacher is faced with is that he finds himself in an area where he no longer enjoys the position of the professional, yet he is expected to continue to play his part as a guide for his students. Actually, even though he is not a specialist in that specific area (a fact that he should be honest about in front of his students and thus attract them in the process of learning by setting himself as an example of determined learner), he can still help students a great deal: he has to motivate students to come to the class, to learn in the class and at home; he has to be an expert on plain English (actually this is what future employees are first required in order to deal with their clients); he has to set an example for his students in finding things out (using the internet and dictionaries to provide students with answers to their question); he has to guide them in doing scientific research and he has to function as a source of real-life experiences (e.g. providing students with authentic materials and guiding them in order to properly deal with such situations), (Jeremy Day & Amy Krois-Linder, 2007, p.8).

When designing the materials for an ESP course, as for any course actually, the teacher also has to follow certain planning principles such as establishing clear aims, applying variety and showing flexibility (Callum Robertson, 2002). Thus the teacher should take into consideration realistic questions, for example what the students know already, what they need to know, how well they work together and how motivated they are. Variety is required as this keeps the students interest high and flexibility is expected in order to meet unexpected needs and thus to fully complete the requirements expressed by the learners. More specifically, when planning an English lesson the teachers have to bear in mind three important elements: engage, study and activate (Callum Robertson, 2002). Engage means making students

interested in the class (e.g. by considering their requirements expressed in the needs analysis questionnaire, as well as any study-related needs expressed during the course); study refers to the language focus in the lesson which can be a grammar or a vocabulary problem (the teacher should act as a guide for language learning and should bear in mind that he is not expected to deliver lectures on specific areas of knowledge); activate involves transferring the acquired language into practical tasks thus the students get to see the applicability of ESP and therefore they are prepared to deal with real life situations.

These principles of planning a course are fully met in the design of the courses mentioned before. Their purposes are clearly established at the beginning and the course offers full support in achieving them, namely the development of the four language skills in the legal English: “to improve your ability to read and understand legal texts, such as legal periodicals, commercial legislation, legal correspondence and other commercial law documents”, “to increase your comprehension of spoken English when it is used to speak about legal topics in meetings, presentations, interviews, discussions, etc.”, “to strengthen your speaking skills and to enable you to engage more effectively in a range of speaking situations, typical of legal practice, such as client interviews, discussions with colleagues and contract negotiations” (Amy Krois Lindner, 2006, p. 2). Along with various types of authentic material, these courses include a variety of tasks that are all designed to build the core skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking. There are also supplementary exercises such as games and activities, optional lead-in/ extension for exploiting the grammar and vocabulary from the reading and listening sections more fully, as well as online tasks at the end of each unit which are meant to improve the on-line legal English research skills of the students. This variety betrays the main role of these courses whose main function is to offer support and not to condition the language instructor when he selects the teaching materials. The main criterion that takes precedence is the student who must be fully equipped with the skills required by the ever-changing labor market and the teaching materials must be selected so that this goal is met.

The analysis of the above mentioned courses on Legal English has revealed two main important aspects: one is that they offer a variety of exercises for developing the four major language skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking thus providing the language instructor with several options when he has to choose the materials that fit the learners’ profile and at the same time they open new ways for students in furthering their study of the specialized terminology by making reference to on-line resources whose main function is to develop their research skills. Thus these courses are valuable resources and their role is to inspire and not to condition the language instructor. The selection of the teaching materials should depend on the learners’ profile as well as on the employee’s profile as demanded by the labor market. Therefore the instructor has to select the materials according to these requirements, he has to plan his activities properly and he has employ the suitable teaching methods so that when his students get on the labor market their language skills recommend them as valuable assets for the companies or institutions they join.

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