

AUTHENTIC MATERIALS VS TEXTBOOKS IN ESP (ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES)

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Abstract: *The purpose of this study is to analyze and compare the value of authentic materials and textbooks in ESP (English for Specific Purposes) learning and teaching context. The study compares the characteristics of the authentic materials and the characteristics of textbooks designed and selected for the purpose of teaching and learning English as a foreign language in ESP setting. The study defines the role of materials in ESP setting and compares the benefits and possible drawbacks of both types of materials and resources: the authentic materials in English for Specific Purposes context compared to traditional textbooks designed for the purpose of teaching and learning English for Specific Purposes. The study identifies the benefits of authentic materials, which include the richness as an input source and the authenticity of the tasks offered to learners, as well as the negative sides of authentic materials, which include the level of difficulty that these materials might present to the learner. Furthermore, the study identifies the benefits of textbooks, which include available sources for the learners and less time consuming class preparation for the teachers, as well as the drawbacks which include the impossibility of finding a textbook which corresponds entirely to learners' needs. In addition, the article focuses on teachers' attitudes and opinions regarding the appropriateness and exploitability of each source and their preferences and reasons for material selection. The target population consists of eleven lecturers who teach English for Specific Purposes in tertiary education. The lecturers teach various branches of ESP, including ESP for Computer Sciences, Business, Communication and Legal Studies. Data collection is conducted through a specifically designed questionnaire, addressing the questions of materials selection, teachers' preferences regarding textbooks or authentic materials and the selection criteria applied by the lecturers. Furthermore, the article attempts to offer recommendations regarding materials selection and opting between authentic materials and/or textbooks in ESP setting.*

Key words: *authentic; ESP; textbooks; authentic materials; selection of materials*

1. Introduction and Purpose of the Study

This article focuses on the process of materials selection in the context of teaching English for Specific Purposes with analysis of two types of materials: authentic materials and textbooks designed for the purpose of teaching English for Specific Purposes. The study describes the characteristics of both types of materials: authentic materials as well as textbooks which are used in ESP setting. The study

attempts to differentiate the potential benefits and drawbacks of both types of materials in teaching English for Specific Purposes.

The study attempts to answer the following research questions:

- What is the role of materials in ESP context?
- What are the benefits and possible drawbacks of the authentic materials in ESP context?
- What are the benefits and possible drawbacks of textbooks designed for the purpose of teaching and learning English for Specific Purposes?

This study is conducted at South East European University (SEEU) in Republic of Macedonia and in the Language Center which is part of SEEU. The Language Center offers both general and ESP language courses to the entire students' population at SEEU. The ESP courses are offered during semester 3 and semester 4. The prerequisite for taking ESP courses is the intermediate level of proficiency (B1 according to the Common European Framework for Languages). The ESP courses offered are the following:

- ESP for Business Administration
- ESP for Computer Science and Business Informatics
- ESP for Legal Studies
- ESP for Public Administration and Political Sciences
- ESP for Communication

In this context, the process of preparing, supplying and adapting materials for the offered ESP courses was never an easy task. The dilemma between using commercial textbooks available on the market or authentic materials or academic texts from the content field of studies was always present and influenced the decision regarding teaching engagements and accepting or refusing these courses.

The role of materials in ESP teaching and learning is significant. Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998:170-171) state the following reasons for using materials in ESP context:

- As a source of language
- As a learning support
- For motivation and stimulation
- For reference

1.1. Materials as a source of language

In teaching contexts where exposure to English is not constant and English is taught as a foreign language, the materials may be among the rare sources of English available to students. Although these contexts are rare presently, due to the exposure to English via social networks, media and communication, there are still cases where the ESP classroom is a primary source of language. In these cases, materials serve the purpose to enhance the exposure to target language.

1.2. Materials as learning support

Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998: 171) state the following:” As a learning support, materials need to be reliable, that is to work, to be consistent and to have some

recognizable pattern". However, they argue against using a fixed format of materials. In addition, they emphasize the need of stimulation of cognitive processes and providing the learners with a sense of progression.

1.3. Materials for stimulation and motivation

Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998:171) define this characteristic of materials in ESP in the following way: " To stimulate and motivate, materials need to be challenging yet achievable; to offer new ideas and information whilst being grounded in the learners' experience and knowledge; to encourage fun and creativity." In addition, materials have to offer something new for the learner, to take into consideration the needs of the language learners and to connect to the learners' reality.

1.4. Materials for reference

In order to serve the purpose of self-study or reference, materials need to be organized, complete and very clear. The explanations, variety of relevant examples and practice activities need to be present, in addition to answer keys. Materials for reference need to be clearly organized and easy to use and find necessary information.

It can be concluded that the role of materials in ESP is significant and the choice of materials has an impact on the overall success in language learning in ESP context.

2. Authentic Materials and Textbooks in ESP (English for Specific Purposes) Setting

One of the most important choices when it comes to ESP (English for Specific Purposes) course design is the process of material selection.ESP practitioners often face a dilemma: choosing a textbook designed for a specific branch of ESP (Computer Sciences, Business, Legal Studies or other branch of ESP) , choosing authentic materials related to the field of study, including different documents or forms, texts related to the area of study ; or choosing a blend of different types of materials, authentic materials included. The question is: what is the best choice in ESP context? Can we rely on a single textbook or our ability, as ESP practitioners, to choose relevant authentic materials? What would correspond better to students' needs and the teaching context?

2.1. Authentic materials in ESP: benefits and drawbacks

Prior to analysis of potential benefits and drawbacks of authentic materials, it is important to define the notion of authentic and authentic materials. Gilmore (2007) provides eight meanings of the notion authentic. According to Gilmore (2007), authenticity relates to:

- The language produced and used by native speakers in a language community
- The language produced by a real speaker or writer for a real audience and for the purpose of delivering a real message
- The qualities given to the text/ message by the listener or reader
- The interaction between student and teachers

- The tasks given
- The assessment
- The culture and the ability to adapt to target language group
- The social situation in the classroom

Therefore, it can be concluded that the concept of authenticity depends on a combination of several factors, including the message, the text, the circumstances and the purpose of communication.

Gilmore (2007) discusses the discrepancy between authentic language and textbook language and provides arguments in favor of using authentic materials. Regarding the implications for materials design, Gilmore (2007:103) states the following: “ Authentic materials, particularly audiovisual ones, offer a much richer source of input for learners and have the potential to be exploited in different ways and on different levels to develop learners’ communicative competence. Unlike authentic materials, the traditional source of materials found in textbooks are described as follows: “The contrived materials of traditional textbooks have often presented learners with a meager and frequently distorted sample of the target language to work with and have failed to meet many of their communicative needs (Schiffirin, 1996 in Gilmore, 2007). Thus, the arguments in favor of using authentic materials are the richness of the materials as a source, the possibilities of developing learner’s communicative competence, the opportunities to put target language in context and the myriad of activities and tasks that can be used in a specific language learning context.

One of the characteristic features of ESP (English for Specific Purposes) setting is the necessity to use authentic materials in teaching the target language and establishing two types of authentic interaction. Learner authenticity, defined by Lee (1995) is the interaction between the language learner and the context in which the language is being used. Classroom authenticity, defined by MacDonald et al. (2006) is authenticity created in the context of language learning classroom and by creating meaningful learning contexts in which the participants can discuss, share their opinions and engage in socially motivated and meaningful activities. Therefore, the purpose of ESP leaning materials is to create opportunities for meaningful interaction and an appropriate and motivating context. For that reason, authentic texts and other documents or materials can be used. They expose the learners to a meaningful context, provide the authentic and needed vocabulary and establish a link with the content area of study. They can include authentic texts from the content area of study, journal articles and texts and visual materials, forms and documents, instructions and other types of materials.

Although authentic materials provide a rich source of learning opportunities for ESP teachers and language learning and teaching situations, it needs to be emphasized that there are potential drawbacks. Probably the most notable drawback is that the majority of authentic materials were not designed for the purpose of language learning. As a result, these materials can be either too difficult or too easy for a group of language learners.

Using authentic materials can also require a large amount of preparation on behalf of the ESP instructor, which includes searching for relevant and appropriate materials, selecting the vocabulary or grammar items to be taught, adapting the materials to serve the teaching goals and objectives, adapting the materials in

terms of language difficulty and adapting the materials in order to fit them in the frame of a class time. Thus using authentic materials requires significant experience and knowledge on behalf of the ESP practitioner. The above mentioned reasons sometimes raise the issue of practicality of using authentic materials in a typical ESP or general language teaching and learning context.

2.2. Textbooks in ESP: benefits and drawbacks

There are several arguments in favor of and against necessity of textbooks in ESP learning and teaching context. In order to offer an answer to this question, a more general analysis of the potential benefits and drawbacks of textbooks in language teaching and learning is needed. Hutchinson and Torres (1994) argue that textbooks provide structure which can act as a safe base from which the learners can successfully develop autonomy. They also define the interaction between the teacher, materials, and learners in the following way:

This interaction has to be managed in order to provide the structure and predictability that are necessary to make the event socially tolerable to the participants, to enable learners and teachers to know where the lesson fits into the general pattern of things, to save teachers and learners work, and to give legitimate external parties access to, and possibly influence upon, what takes place in the classroom. The very fact that a lesson is a dynamic interaction, therefore, leads not to a need for maximum freedom, but to a need for a predictable and visible structure both within the lesson and across lessons. The textbook, we suggest, is the best means of providing this structure.

(Hutchinson & Torres 1994:321)

The arguments provided by Ansary & Babaii (2002) in favor of using textbooks in foreign language learning and teaching are the following:

- A textbook provides a purpose for learners and they take their learning seriously.
- A textbook can serve as a syllabus
- A textbook provides already prepared texts and tasks

A textbook provides support and guidance for inexperienced teachers. Jordan (1997:127) emphasizes the subjective element when selecting a textbook:

What attracts us to a book in the first place? In practice, it might be for a number or combination of reasons: an attractive, well designed cover; the persuasive publisher's blurb; a list of contents that seems to cover everything that we want; the level seems appropriate for the students, a clearly set out text, and practice material that appears to be user-friendly; informative teacher's notes and key; a colleague recommended it; the size is convenient, the price is right; it is available; and so on.

Jordan (1997:127)

The arguments above, in favor of using textbooks in the context of language teaching and learning, can be also applicable in the context of learning and teaching ESP. An appropriate textbook in an ESP classroom, provides a readymade source of materials and activities, as well as a focus and purpose for language learners. Textbooks usually include appropriate and useful topics for discussion and relevant vocabulary from the content area of study, which includes Business, Information Technology, Legal Studies, etc.

Swales (1980) after analyzing the materials and textbooks in the context of ESP, recommends a combination of external sources (textbooks) and internal sources (within institution and locally produced, instead of focusing on ESP textbooks. The requirements for textbook use in ESP context, according to Swales (1980) are that the textbook should not be “hermetic”, thus offering a chance to ESP practitioners to use other materials in combination with the textbook.

However, there are several arguments against using textbooks in the context of teaching and learning ESP. First of all, it is almost impossible to find a textbook which will correspond to learners’ needs and their level of proficiency. The majority of the ESP groups are mixed ability groups, and it is almost impossible to find a textbook which will correspond ideally to students’ level of language proficiency. In addition, the teachers tend to over rely on a textbook, thus disregarding their own creativity and unique approach to teaching. Some of the topics in the textbooks might not correspond to students’ needs or even their reality. Very frequently, especially in ESP for Computer Sciences, the topics and the texts can be outdated and therefore cannot offer possibilities for further exploitation and learning.

3. Research Method, Target Population, Results and Discussion

Having in mind the arguments related to materials selection in the context of ESP, this study focused on teachers’ opinions and perceptions regarding the preferred materials used in ESP classroom. The research method included a questionnaire given to 11 teachers who teach various ESP courses offered by the Language Center at SEEU. The teachers are between 35-50 years of age. Their teaching experience varies from 11 to 15 years of teaching at tertiary level and approximately the same number of years of teaching English for Specific Purposes. The questionnaire consisted of the following questions:

- Do you consider materials and the process of materials selection to be important in ESP?
- Do you use a textbook in your ESP classes? If yes, what are the benefits? If no, what are the reasons?
- When choosing a textbook for your ESP classes, what are your selection criteria?
- Do you use authentic materials in your ESP classes? If yes, what are the benefits? If no, what are the reasons?
- When choosing authentic materials/ authentic academic texts for your ESP classes, what are your selection criteria?
- Do you use a combination of materials in your ESP classes? If yes, what do you combine? If no, what are the reasons?
- What is the most notable obstacle when compiling teaching materials for ESP?

In total, 11 ESP teachers responded to the questions of the questionnaire. The responses were obtained from both male and female teachers, who teach ESP for Legal Studies and Public Administration, ESP for Business Administration and ESP for Computer Sciences and Business Informatics. Their responses reflect their perceptions and preferences in terms of materials selection for their ESP courses.

The majority of the ESP teachers believe that the process of selecting materials is very important in ESP teaching. Some of their answers reflect this opinion.

- *I strongly believe that this process is important. Without appropriate materials, you do not have a successful ESP class.*
- *For me , materials are the most important aspect of an ESP course*

As far as using textbooks in their ESP classes is concerned, teachers' answers reflect the following situation: ESP teachers prefer the idea of using a textbook in their ESP classes. However, sometimes they are not able to find a textbook which corresponds to the teaching and learning context and their students' needs. In addition, one ESP teacher added the explanation that ESP textbooks are occasionally outdated and therefore sometimes inappropriate to use in the context of ESP for Computer Sciences and Business Informatics. Some of their replies included the following:

- *I use a textbook in my ESP for Business Administration class. I find it very relevant, well organized and helpful. I do not feel as if I have to spend too much time to prepare and it is very practical.*
- *I do not use a specific textbook, simply because I could not find one for the ESP course that I teach. There aren't too many textbooks Public Administration and Political Sciences Studies. I use of combination of materials.*
- *I use a textbook for my ESP for CS class. The topics are great but I cannot limit the materials to this textbook only.*

Teachers' responses to the next question reveal that the most relevant criteria for selecting the textbook are suitability in terms of language proficiency and corresponding to their students needs. Several teachers also included textbook availability and affordability. Of course, choosing a textbook which is not available on the market or too expensive is impractical and probably inefficient choice of a material.

- *Textbooks cannot be too expensive and the students should be able to buy them either on campus or in local stores.*
- *Textbooks should not be too easy or too difficult.*
- *The topics have to be relevant.*

As far as authentic materials are concerned, most teachers were aware of the benefits of these materials. Qualities such as challenging in a positive way, motivating and relevant were included in the explanations. Among the selection criteria for authentic materials, relevance and appropriateness in terms of language and corresponding to students needs were mentioned. Visual authentic materials as well as written materials were used. Videos and footages including TED talks and public speeches, courtroom recording and news footages were included in the responses. Among written materials, different forms and templates, written materials related to the legislative, official gazettes and written reports were mentioned. The majority of teachers reported that they were very well received by the students. However, most of them stated that adapting authentic materials in

order to be used to correspond to a specific learning objective is time consuming and very difficult and occasionally not successful.

The question about using a combination of materials was answered positively by all participants. All of the responses indicated that a combination of materials is used in their ESP courses. The responses reflected that the majority of the teachers use either a textbook or a course reader with a compilation of different texts, accompanied with grammar and vocabulary items. Additional handouts, supplementary materials, authentic visual and written materials are used in addition to the textbooks or course readers. However, none of the ESP teachers relied primarily or entirely on authentic materials. Authentic materials were used only as supplementary materials.

The last question was focused on the possible obstacles or difficulties when obtaining course materials for ESP classes. Some of the answers listed the following difficulties:

- *Some of the textbooks are not appropriate in terms of language or topics.*
- *Some of the textbooks are too expensive.*
- *Some of the authentic materials are not appropriate in terms of clarity or quality (for instance the quality of visual materials and recordings).*
- *Some of the materials focus on one language skill only.*
- *Sometimes, authentic materials have to be translated or adapted, which is too time consuming.*

From the answers above, it is clear that the process and criteria for materials selection in the context of teaching and learning English for Specific Purposes is not simple and straightforward. A variety of different factors have to be taken into consideration in order to respond to students' needs and learning objectives.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

From the literature review and ESP teacher's responses in this study, it can be concluded that teachers consider materials and the choice of materials in the field of ESP as crucial. If a textbook is chosen for a specific ESP group, several criteria have to be taken into consideration. The textbook selected needs to correspond to the teaching context and learning objectives. It should be appropriate in terms of language. The textbook needs to be affordable and easily accessible for the learners and teachers alike.

Authentic materials used in ESP courses should be relevant and suitable. In addition, the materials used in ESP context would ideally deal with the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. The process of selection of authentic materials should take into account students' needs as well as potential difficulties that a certain group of students or individual students might encounter when dealing with specific tasks. These materials need to be adapted and used according to the needs of the specific study group. Finally, in ESP teaching and learning context, it is important to remember that experts from the content area of study or specific field, as well as learners themselves, have a significant input when materials and textbooks are selected for an ESP course. Therefore, both students and the teacher can be considered as a relevant source of material.

In conclusion, it needs to be emphasized that as a perfect textbook or language learning material is non-existing in both general and ESP teaching context. As a result, the selection of materials is an ongoing process during which the materials need to be constantly renewed, upgraded, and adapted.

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Appendix

Please read the questions carefully and respond to the questions in detail and as accurately as you can, taking into consideration your experience and expertise as an ESP practitioner.

Do you consider materials and the process of materials selection to be important in ESP?

Do you use a textbook in your ESP classes? If yes, what are the benefits? If no, what are the reasons?

When choosing a textbook for your ESP classes, what are your selection criteria?

Do you use authentic materials in your ESP classes? If yes, what are the benefits? If no, what are the reasons?

When choosing authentic materials/ authentic academic texts for your ESP classes, what are your selection criteria?

Do you use a combination of materials in your ESP classes? If yes, what do you combine? If no, what are the reasons?

What is the most notable obstacle when compiling teaching materials for your ESP courses?
