



Designing Engaging ESP and EAP Learning Materials

Dietmar Tatzl¹

FH JOANNEUM University of Applied Sciences, Austria¹

Abstract

Learning materials are central for studying a language, as they allow students to follow courses and review contents after class. In many professional fields and tertiary academic disciplines, language specialists face a dearth of published instructional books, so that they need to produce their own teaching and learning materials. This is particularly the case in English for specific purposes (ESP) and English for academic purposes (EAP) contexts, where groups, courses, and learning goals are so specific that only tailored classroom materials can meet the demands of such teaching situations. This contribution presents an overview of features to design engaging ESP and EAP learning materials which are supposed to arouse students' interest, grab their attention, and keep them involved during course time as well as facilitate their self-study process at home. The author thus draws on his own experience of creating ESP and EAP materials for aeronautical engineering students at a university of applied sciences. It is hoped that English language instructors at other institutions will find inspiration for creating engaging materials for their own courses.

Keywords: *ESP, EMI, higher education, materials design, engagement, motivation*

1. Introduction

English for specific purposes (ESP) and English for academic purposes (EAP) in higher education are branches of English language teaching characterised by contextualised learning materials tailored to the needs of distinct groups of participants. Such learners are students of content subjects usually not related to language or communication, which means that their main interests lie in their disciplines. Yet in many tertiary institutions, students may select or enrol in English language courses, modules, and programmes to improve their foreign communication skills. Learning materials in such settings play a pivotal role in supporting the learning process and outcomes [cf. 1] and need to be designed with the target groups and objectives in mind.

This contribution aims at reviewing aspects of ESP and EAP learning materials that the author regards as engaging for students [cf. 2] and which enable students to identify with English as an important part of their education. The experience he draws from has been gathered for over 20 years of teaching aeronautical engineering students at a university of applied sciences. The elements found central in providing a rewarding learning experience for students are a clear structure; exercises with the corresponding answer key; a variation of contents, tasks, and activities; photographs, colours, and symbols; quotations and discussion questions; and the quality of materials.

2. Clear structure

A clear structure facilitates the comprehension of and interaction with content. It also enables students to navigate through materials efficiently and locate single parts of documents. A page with a clear structure is not only more appealing to readers but also attests to diligence and care on the part of its author. Examples of non-textual structural features in materials design are headings, boxes, frames, tables, bullet points, or lines. These elements stick out visually and thus function both as eye catchers and markers of distinct information. In order to maintain a logical structure, it is necessary to repeat the same design features for the same category of information throughout a text, for instance by using boxes around warm-up questions for activities.

3. Exercises with an answer key

ESP and EAP materials also need to contain language exercises to provide learners with opportunities for practice. Sample materials created by tertiary ESP teachers in Spain, for instance, focused on specialist terminology and language skills [3]. Particularly in ESP and EAP, the accuracy of written text is important in various professional and academic genres. Through an attention to linguistic forms and patterns, students can improve their writing skills and develop confidence as authors of texts.



The types and focus areas of specific language exercises will vary, although research on grammatical structures in ESP and EAP contexts suggests that “there seems to be more commonality than diversity” [4, p. 90]. At all events, language exercises should be accompanied by a complete answer key. An answer key enables learners to work with the materials independently in class and for self-study after a session. A further advantage of an answer key is that students may refer back to correct solutions at any time they wish, and they can rest assured that they have the model answer provided by the teacher, which may prove invaluable when studying for an examination.

4. Variation of contents, tasks, and activities

A broad range of contents, tasks, and activities may work as a precaution against tiresome monotony. Humans have a limited attention span for digesting information, which is why new impulses can redirect students’ attention and are hoped to create interesting and diversified learning materials.

Depending on the focus of a course, its contents will necessarily vary, yet it is helpful to include contents in different formats [cf. 5; 6]. If a certain topic is treated in class, it can be introduced with a video, accompanied by a written text, and concluded by a group discussion, for example. Content should be presented in a way that supports understanding, and often the treatment of a topic from multiple angles may lay the foundations for the recognition of details, interconnections, and contrasting views.

Furthermore, the variation of tasks and activities can maintain momentum in a course and create dynamics for interaction. Particularly the alteration of group sizes and constellations can turn ESP and EAP classes into engaging learning experiences [cf. 7]. Similarly, different types of tasks and activities with varying duration may also afford students the opportunity to work with alternating partners in interesting learning environments.

5. Photographs, colours, and symbols

Visual elements like photographs, colours, and symbols accompanying pedagogical content can further add to the attractiveness of ESP and EAP materials for learners. Colour coding types of information, hierarchical levels, or parts of graphical representations tends to make materials appealing, as long as colours are used consistently and judiciously. Furthermore, photographs and symbols are likely to arouse interest as well, yet again there should be a logical connection between content and illustration.

6. Quotations and discussion questions

Quotations from literature [8] and discussion questions related to textual or audiovisual input may also improve the educational value of ESP and EAP materials. The theme of a course unit or lesson can be made more interesting by spicing it up with the words uttered by well-known persons or found in literary texts. Such quotations may add a different angle, humour, advice, experience, or motivation to a course or topic. Similarly, discussion questions encourage students to engage with a topic at a deeper critical thinking level and may result in new perspectives challenging and expanding learners’ own world view. Discussion questions further allow for practising spoken interaction and oral fluency, thus increasing liveliness and student participation in ESP and EAP classes.

It remains to be weighed whether quotations and discussions in ESP and EAP courses should include controversial topics, as some learners and teachers may feel uncomfortable with heated debates and the risk of negative emotions resulting from arguments that undermine their own convictions, opinions, and attitudes. Nevertheless, as communicative elements in a curriculum, ESP and EAP courses tend to be well suited for addressing controversial issues as a way of promoting freedom of speech, democracy, diversity, and human rights. These values, after all, are threatened by global events and developments, so that their support becomes crucial in liberal tertiary education.

7. Quality of materials

Major factors contributing to the quality of learning materials mainly entail language, mechanics, and consistency. In other words, authors of course materials need to practise what they preach and should strive for correct language, punctuation, spelling, and capitalisation as well as for consistency of usage throughout their learning aids. Teachers are role models for learners and thus need to ensure that they stay credible concerning the requirements they impose on students’ work. In the end, the quality of learning materials may be decisive for students’ engagement with them. Poorly designed and written materials are likely to fail in their aim of offering rewarding learning experiences. For these very reasons, it is doubtful that artificial intelligence (AI) will replace tertiary educators as materials writers,



as such AI tools would need to set examples of academic rigour and ethics that only humans are capable of implementing.

8. Student involvement

Depending on the situated cultural expectations and contexts of learners and institutions, student involvement in materials design may be a viable option for ESP and EAP professionals. As Gollin-Kies et al. note, “it is now much easier to involve learners in locating their own resources for learning” and in “genuinely collaborative materials and course development” [9, p. 99]. However, some students may have reservations towards their involvement in materials writing, as they may deem this task the duty of a teacher, for which he or she is also employed or contracted and thus rewarded financially. In any case, what tends to be appreciated by student groups across various ESP and EAP contexts is their participation in the generation of ideas for materials and course design, so that they obtain the possibility of contributing without feeling compelled to take on a teacher’s responsibilities.

9. Conclusions

The elements of engaging ESP and EAP learning materials discussed in this contribution do not represent an exhaustive list but are examples selected from the author’s teaching practice. They are supposed to serve as a review of materials design features and inspiration for professionals in similar educational environments. All these features can be applied to class materials and stand-alone self-study materials alike. At this point, it is worth noting that materials design requires much time and effort, if the product is expected to reach certain quality standards. This contribution may help to reduce this effort by serving as a quick guide and reference to ESP and EAP materials design for tertiary educators.

References

- [1] Widodo, H. P. (2016). Teaching English for specific purposes (ESP): English for vocational purposes (EVP). In W. A. Renandya & H. P. Widodo (Eds.), *English language teaching today: Linking theory and practice* (pp. 277–291). *English Language Education, Vol. 5*. Switzerland: Springer International Publishing. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-38834-2_19
- [2] Stoller, F. L. (2016). EAP materials and tasks. In K. Hyland & P. Shaw (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of English for academic purposes* (pp. 577–591). *Routledge Handbooks in Applied Linguistics*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge-Taylor & Francis.
- [3] Baştürkmen, H., & Bocanegra-Valle, A. (2018). Materials design processes, beliefs and practices of experienced ESP teachers in university settings in Spain. In Y. Kırkgöz & K. Dikilitaş (Eds.), *Key issues in English for specific purposes in higher education* (pp. 13–27). *English Language Education, Vol. 11*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-70214-8_2
- [4] Farhady, H., Tavassoli, K., & Haghighi Irani, F. (2018). Selecting corpus-based grammatical structures for ESP/EAP materials. In Y. Kırkgöz & K. Dikilitaş (Eds.), *Key issues in English for specific purposes in higher education* (pp. 77–92). *English Language Education, Vol. 11*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-70214-8_5
- [5] Mishan, F. (2013). Modes of delivery. In B. Tomlinson (Ed.), *Applied linguistics and materials development* (pp. 287–301). London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic.
- [6] Prior, P. (2013). Multimodality and ESP research. In B. Paltridge & S. Starfield (Eds.), *The handbook of English for specific purposes* (pp. 519–534). *Blackwell Handbooks in Linguistics*. Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell–Wiley & Sons.
- [7] Mačianskienė, N., & Bijeikienė, V. (2018). Fostering active learner engagement in ESP classes. In Y. Kırkgöz & K. Dikilitaş (Eds.), *Key issues in English for specific purposes in higher education* (pp. 223–242). *English Language Education, Vol. 11*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-70214-8_13
- [8] Tatzl, D. (2020). Functions of literature in teaching English for specific purposes. In Pixel (Ed.), *Conference Proceedings: 13th International Conference Innovation in Language Learning: Virtual Edition* (pp. 215–219). 13th International Conference, Florence, Italy, 12–13 November 2020. Bologna, Italy: Filodiritto Publisher.
- [9] Gollin-Kies, S., Hall, D. R., & Moore, S. H. (2015). *Language for specific purposes. Research and Practice in Applied Linguistics*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.