



No Textbook is Perfect: Enhancing the Authenticity and Relevance of ESP Courses

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Abstract

We all know that no textbook ever suits the needs of your class perfectly and this is particularly true for Language for specific purposes courses, especially in the field of science and technology. One of the reasons is certainly the fact that teaching materials in this area outdate more quickly than in others or than general language textbooks, which often leads to issues with textbooks' relevance and authenticity and can result in students losing motivation or questioning the entire purpose of the course they are attending.

With myriads of online resources now at hand, we can however accommodate the needs of any class and provide future professionals with specialized and up-to-date materials. This paper aims to demonstrate how videos from the TED talks database and online video sharing platforms (e.g. youtube) can serve various purposes in your LSP classrooms as topic lead-ins, further explanation (endorsed by an expert view) or a fun topic closure.

The paper draws from our experience at the Faculty of Electrical Engineering and Communication and the Faculty of Information Technology, Brno University of Technology (Czech Republic), where we teach two compulsory English for specific purposes courses – English for Engineering and English for IT – to undergraduate students, and presents the obstacles we, as ESP teachers, have to face and overcome using online tools.

Keywords: ESP, English for IT, English for Engineering, online videos, authenticity, relevance

We all know that no textbook ever suits the needs of your class perfectly and this is particularly true for Language for specific purposes courses, especially in the field of science and technology. One of the reasons is certainly the fact that teaching materials in this area outdate more quickly than in others or than general language textbooks, which often leads to issues with textbooks' relevance and authenticity and can result in students losing motivation or questioning the entire purpose of the course they are attending.

The Department of Foreign Languages at the Faculty of Electrical Engineering and Communication, Brno University of Technology, provides two highly specialized ESP courses – *English for Engineering* and *English for IT* – designed to equip the students with relevant language in some of the fastest evolving areas of science and technology.

Most LSP/ESP teachers, like all staff of our department, have some background in humanities with a degree in linguistics, teaching or literature. What they often lack, however, is the expert knowledge of the particular area that their LSP course is concerned with and which they only learn on the job. While it is not absolutely necessary to be an expert in both, it would certainly give the teacher an edge that the students could benefit from. This apparent lack of the instructors' expertise combined with a textbook that might not be entirely up-to-date with current developments in the field – due to different reasons, such as simple non-existence of a more suitable material or the fact that once a textbook is approved as a teaching material for a certain course, it is usually kept for several years (the reasons are, again, plentiful) – presents one of the greatest challenges that ESP teachers have to deal with on a daily basis.

Out-dated materials lose their relevance and cease to be taken as reliable sources and thus seriously impede students' identification with the course, their engagement in the learning process and might endanger the teacher's credibility. The major issue here is that while the core lexical corpus of a given field may remain intact, new phenomena appear and technology in IT and engineering advances at a pace that no textbook author can possibly reflect. It is therefore the teacher's responsibility to critically

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review the materials and decide what needs to be done to enhance the textbook's reliability and the course's attractiveness.

One of the ways how to support ESP classes' relevance and authenticity is to make use of online videos instead of/in addition to the regular coursebook audio-recordings, which are usually based on scripted mono/dialogues without much authentic content. Fortunately, with myriads of online resources now at hand, we can accommodate the needs of any class and provide our students with appealing, specialized and up-to-date resources that reflect the reality in their area of expertise and expose them to natural language varieties as used by the scientific discourse community as well as non-professional language users, both native and non-native.

Video-based activities can be used at every stage of an ESP lesson. As lead-ins, they introduce the topic, arouse interest and function as discussion prompts. Short, light videos at the intersection of science and popular culture serve this purpose very well. It is crucial to have your audience on mind at all times when choosing the most suitable video. Undergraduates at the Faculty of Electrical Engineering and Communication and the Faculty of Information Technology are (predominantly) male students in their early twenties and movie trailers, such as *Rush* for car parts and racing topic or *Matrix* in *English for IT* classes, work perfectly with them.

Although, as pointed out above, most LSP teachers are language experts, but not necessarily engineers, scientists or any other specialists, they can bring the other specialist to their classroom via the screen and the right TED talk (www.ted.com). TED talks are fantastic teaching materials because they now represent thousands of videos stored in an online database, fully downloadable and sorted by topics, duration and language. It is thus easy to find a talk with motivating content that the students can engage with. TED stages have hosted many prominent personalities, e.g. Bill Gates (Microsoft), Tim Berners-Lee (inventor of the world wide web), Linus Torvalds (creator of Linux operating system) or Steve Jobs (Apple) just to name a few from the IT field. All these professional programmers, engineers, scientists and successful entrepreneurs are people that the students respect and admire and it would be a mistake to miss the opportunity to hear what they have to say as their talks can further explain and develop a textbook topic being dealt with in the class or bring new, challenging perspectives and provoke discussion. Uploaded into an e-learning system, like Moodle, along with a set of comprehension activities, they can be used as compelling homework that the students actually want to do (or at least feel less reluctant to do) as they offer content in compliance with their field of study and interests in a popular, easily accessible, form. Thanks to the fact that TED audio files can be downloaded independently, they can also serve as bases for end-of-the-term exam listening comprehension tasks.

All TED talks come with subtitles (that can be switched on and off) and transcripts in English and 25 other languages, which makes the teacher's job almost effortless in contrast to most videos found on online sharing platforms, such as Youtube. Youtube videos are not downloadable by default and so there is always a risk of ruining the entire lesson in case of internet connection failure. What is more, they are not always guaranteed to have proper subtitles and this makes the preparation of comprehension tasks much more time-consuming. In spite of all this, the immense variety of content makes it an invaluable source of material that other sites can hardly compete with.

While TED talks are by their nature rather long compared with the usual coursebook recordings and so they need to be allocated more time, sometimes even a whole lesson built around them (which can be an exciting endeavor), Youtube can provide shorter clips that can function as vocabulary revision and lesson closure.

Since most of these videos are not primarily designed as language teaching aids (unless you deliberately choose a strictly educational source like the *British Council Teaching English* channel), they feature advanced-level speakers addressing, again, mostly native audiences, which is perfectly fine, because this authenticity is exactly what we are looking for, but it can also cause problems. The fresh air and excitement that the videos bring to lessons may come hand in hand with serious comprehension challenges for some learners.

To get around this problem, all video-related tasks and activities should be created to match the level of each particular class. In case of TED talks, the teacher can decide whether to play the video with or without subtitles, whether or not to enable the students' first language subtitles (if they are available), whether or not to use the transcript and how to use it, how to formulate comprehension questions –



whether to create multiple choice answers or open-ended questions, whether to show or hide the missing words in a gap-filling exercise, etc. In mixed-level classes, different students can be assigned different tasks while watching the same video; instead of distributing the adapted worksheets directly, the teacher can let the students choose themselves which type of exercise they feel like doing to avoid labelling them as strong or weak learners. In this way we can reduce the stress and frustration that some lower-level students may feel when they are exposed to natural (and specialized professional) language and make sure that they still find watching the videos and engaging in the related classroom activities as enjoyable as the students whose command of English is much better.

As we have just seen, online videos are an amazing tool that can help (not only) language for specific purposes teachers to remedy some ills that arise from relying too much on ready-made coursebooks – a practice that might be more widespread in LSP classes rather than general language courses due to the fact that some teachers may not feel as confident teaching LSP (at least at the beginning of their career) as they would teaching general language. With tailor-made exercises accompanying the videos, the speakers become the teachers' partners, giving them a helping hand and giving the lessons that much sought-after wow-factor.