

A RATIONALE FOR MATERIALS PRODUCTION IN ESP

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At the Universidad Simón Bolívar (U.S.B.), we have opted for internally devised materials over ready-made textbooks in our ESP courses and have thus accepted the time-consuming and exhaustive work that accompanies such a decision. Is it worth it -- the constant modifications of course design, the extensive search for a more suitable text, the impressionistic guidelines that one tentatively pursues? We feel that in our situation such a decision is inevitable.

It is to be noted however that our decision does not or will not meet the approval of everyone. In the various ESP panel discussions at the 1981 TESOL convention, one of the emerging themesongs with respect to materials production in ESP was that everyone was busy "reinventing the wheel". In fact, Swales (1980), one of its main exponents states that:

"...there has been heavy duplication of much basic work and certain types of insight have been painfully and independently gained in many an isolated institution."

He feels that the costly, time consuming duplication of materials is unnecessary since published materials hold distinct advantages: a clear beginning, middle and end, and a greater degree of internal coherence, just to name a few. Thus, he considers that the textbook should be retained, so as to provide "the grammatical/lexical/functional continuum" to the course: however, not in an exclusive sense but rather integratively, supplementing it with materials felt more suitable to students' needs. This traditional "adopt and adapt" technique has proven almost impossible to implement at the U.S.B. for a variety of reasons and has resulted in textbooks being relegated to secondary reference status.

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Firstly, available ESP textbooks are at variance with the approach chosen, at an inappropriate level or too general for our concerns. The U.S.B. student needs English primarily to read texts and journals in his/her scientific career, to a lesser extent to be able to understand papers presented orally, and as a result he/she is required to complete a mandatory first year EST course that employs a functional approach to reading. This course offers a different approach to reading to that which he/she has been exposed to in high school, and serves as a necessary pre-requisite to ESP courses in the different areas of specialization in which this orientation is actively furthered. We therefore presume that while heterogeneity in reading ability will exist upon entry, the reorientation that the first year course offers would provide a common working base, upon which the ESP teacher can build. Thus, the rhetorical act and discourse sequence that the student is trained to identify in general scientific discourse in the first year program is recycled and is seen again in ESP courses as they are realized in the various areas of specialization. In other words, our choice of the type of syllabus we implement in ESP and subsequently the materials chosen is pre-conditioned, or an extension of the orientation to the reading process we have attempted to inculcate in our first year EST course. No textbook so far has reached us that caters specifically to our aims: the textbooks that are available tend to be far too general -- the ghost audience type -- and furthermore, do not focus solely on the teaching of reading. For our orientation, the closest approximation to an ideal textbook would be one that concerns itself with the movement from the rhetorical purpose to how it is realized through language. Besides, our students, after having completed the first year course, where they have been exposed to texts of varying linguistic difficulty (because of the functional focus it was felt that rigorously grading the linguistic levels of the texts was not a priority), would probably find these texts far too simple for the level they have attained. We are therefore forced to devise our own materials, if we are to be consistent with our philosophy.

Textbooks have also proven inadequate because of their subject matter -- usually thematically boring to the students. Since students sometimes enter ESP courses before actually having gained a broader perspective of what their careers deal with, their knowledge of their needs is at best

impressionistic. It is therefore left up to the teacher to interpret their needs for them, most profitably accomplished by going over their career plan with teachers in the specialization areas (See: Project Team Teaching, Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, Bogotá, Colombia, April 1982). The accuracy of the teacher's diagnosis does not guarantee an idyllic solution to the problem since the student's need is not an immediate psychological one i. e. , he is not seeing the application or even the relevance of having to go beyond the first year course. Thus, it depends on the teacher's persuasive influence to convince him/her of the necessity of English. Mead addresses this problem in his statement that:

"The efficacy of ESP materials should be measured by the degree to which the student recognizes their relevance to his immediate needs."

Our contention, therefore, is that the student is not inherently motivated because of the existing circumstances and presenting him with a series of thematically boring texts might discourage rather than animate him/her towards more reading. Even if the teacher, after consultation, were to select readings that presented the different functions to be dealt with, the long-term usefulness of these texts cannot be taken for granted. Textbooks in the specialization areas change according to a teacher's particular bias, become outdated, or simply are translated into the student's native language. We have felt that motivation plays such an important part in our situation that materials that generate interest among the students, i. e. are motivating, must be given top priority; materials production therefore becomes indispensable. The task of choosing appropriate texts is a delicate one bearing in mind that the reader must have a reason for reading. If a successful choice of text by the ESP course designer occurs, it will have incorporated an interesting topic for the student about which he has some prior knowledge (in order to be able to relate to it conceptually), and a linguistic level which allows access to the information without presenting barriers that discourage him/her from attempting to extract the information because of a not sufficiently high language proficiency. The process entailed is so delicate and specific to a particular academic setting that commercially prepared textbooks usually do not even come close to satisfying student needs or providing sufficiently motivating materials at the correct level.

What does this self-imposed task entail for the language teacher? Firstly, it means that he/she does not arrive at a series of 'most perfect texts' the first time that the course is offered but that this comes with subsequent offerings of the course. Of crucial importance here is that the course has the potential to be altered (i. e. reading texts are added or taken out) based on the students' response (needs) so that gradually the course evolves to reflect not the teacher's interpretation, but what is truly interesting to the students. Hopefully, once a series of motivating readings are arrived at, it is assumed that the general consensus of what is interesting for one group holds across subsequent groups at a similar level, thereby eliminating the necessity for alterations to the course design. We regard this evolution as necessary if we hope to achieve 'authenticity' (à la Widdowson) in the materials chosen. It is inherently unjust to the students for the teacher to determine what is authentic or not for them, since he/she remains outside of this psychological relationship. Thus the teacher can best assist by using the feedback from students as an indicator of this authentic relationship. Since the prime objective is to emphasize the functional aspect of the readings, the teacher is obliged to compile an on-going collection of readings that illustrate these functions, in the event that they be needed. Fortunately, since the students need to be familiar with the rhetorical styles of textbooks as well as journals in their specific areas, the teacher has a wide spectrum to choose from, which in turn affords a desirable flexibility in what he/she can present to the student.

Two questions remain unanswered. Have we totally rejected textbooks? A functional approach to reading does not exclude the teaching of language, since this is still the principal goal of the ESP teacher. However, the paths leading towards that end are various and one's choice remains totally conditioned by one's circumstances. We teach language without ever making the point that it is the main focus of our teaching. In this respect, useful exercise types and some readings can be gathered from textbooks so that they are maintained as secondary reference sources. Secondly and finally, is our task a never-ending one that pushes us further into isolation from similar ESP working groups? We think not. Our efforts fit neatly into what Sinclair refers to as 'off-line' and 'on-line' research in that initial course design is based on the teacher's impression -- off-line -- but as the course advances,

the teacher notes areas of difficulty for the students -- on line --. The findings are interesting in that projected areas of difficulty prove relatively easy for students while areas overlooked by the teacher sometimes prove to be rather difficult. In subsequent offerings of the course, it is modified to include those areas of difficulty. It is this on-line research that Swales regards as the potential common factor in separate efforts, in that the linguistic and functional characteristics of these disciplines and sub-disciplines are being arrived at, concurrent with course production. Thus we see our work as supplementary rather than isolated in relation to other work carried out along similar lines in other places. Does it mean therefore that an end-point to materials production is likely? Theoretically yes, but realistically no, since teaching the same materials over and over again invites teacher boredom. As lines of communication are opened within the field and teachers are prepared to share their ideas and findings with others, we hope that the purposefulness of our task is borne out.

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