

ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES: A PRACTITIONER'S VIEW



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The article offers an insight into Slovene curricular reform. Furthermore, it also suggests that ESP learning and teaching should help prepare the students for their further educational and/or professional career. While learning and teaching ESP students' needs should be determined, the courses and learning-teaching materials that provide students with the language they need to actively participate in their professional as well as social, cultural and political life should be created. The article also discusses the idea of evaluation and assessment. And finally, the article suggests that ESP teaching offers an opportunity to demonstrate that teachers are facilitators who can help learners use their specific subject knowledge while developing language skills, and allow learners to accept responsibilities regarding learning.

Key words: Slovene national curriculum, English for specific purposes, needs analysis, materials design.

1. ESP AND SLOVENE NATIONAL CURRICULUM

Learning and teaching English for Specific Purposes has become an integral part of the Slovene national curriculum. ESP is taught in higher classes of secondary technical and vocational education. Young people are being prepared for their future professional career or further education. They know enough general English to start learning English for Specific Purposes (ESP), whereby learning and teaching ESP is not regarded as a separate part of English, it is a continuum of general English on a more specified level. The students are introduced to the English language they are going to meet in their professional careers or their further education. While learning and teaching ESP students realise how vocational, social and linguistic skills are integrated.

After becoming a part of the ESP movement teachers should understand that all language teaching should be tailored to the specific needs of the students. The ability to change from being a general English teacher to becoming an ESP teacher is probably the utmost important characteristic an ESP teacher should possess.

The aim of ESP is to prepare students for work and life. If we want to achieve this aim, we should investigate the students' needs, use authentic learning-teaching materials and act



less as a teacher and more as a facilitator.

An ESP teacher's position is slightly different from the position of a General English teacher. She is not only a teacher, but also a materials writer or at least materials provider, even if she has not received much or any training in materials writing. What is more, despite the fact that an ESP teacher has to prepare tasks and exercises to test her learners' knowledge and skills, she has not received much training in the area of ESP learning and teaching.

When learning is vocationally oriented students should develop communicative skills as well as learn about culture and civilisation features specific in typical vocational situations. We should learn about each vocation's specific needs through needs analysis.

2. NEEDS ANALYSIS AND COURSE DESIGN

Vocationally oriented language learning should provide students with the language they need to improve their occupational chances and lay the foundations for their social, political and cultural life, claim Egloff and Fitzpatrick (1998). ESP practitioners should, therefore, establish what language skills their students will need in their job or further education and tailor their teaching according to the needs. In most vocations communication skills are preferred as well as knowing the culture and civilization features.

Slovenian national curriculum follows the recommendations given above by suggesting that ESP should be taught as a continuum of General English and while learning the language and the skills, students also learn about the culture, and civilization features specific for their professional situation. What is more, the curriculum also recommends that the four language skills (reading, speaking, writing and listening) are developed while teaching and learning ESP, but the skill the students will need the most in their professional career or further education should be prioritized. For example, if an ESP practitioner works with secondary technical school students she should help her students to develop their reading skills, which are regarded to be the most important.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987: 72) believe that in the learning process there is more than just a learner to consider. The learner is just one factor, and we should maximise learning. They continue their explanation by saying that learning-centred approach to course design takes learners into account at every stage of the design process. Further, they also claim that we should be concerned with how learners can acquire knowledge most effectively. For example, if needs analysis determines that learners need to develop reading skills, developing other skills as well will enrich the knowledge, learning will become more effective and it is irrelevant that the knowledge will be mostly used for reading. What is more, processing the same information through different skills is more interesting than just repeating things, and finally, variety makes the learning more motivating.

If we refer to the national curriculum, we notice that different language skills regarding ESP learning and teaching are identified. They do not exclude each other, but it is suggested that we concentrate more on the language skills our students need in their further education or professional career. Maybe we should re-think this suggestion and move from rather

skills-oriented to learning-oriented ESP teaching and learning, always keeping in mind that learning-oriented approach wants to maximise learning.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987: 74) suggest ESP practitioners to consider the certain stages before designing a course, which should not be a linear but a dynamic, negotiated process: identify the learners, study the theoretical view of learning, analyse the learning situation, analyse the target situation, study the theoretical views of language, identify attitudes/wants/potential of learners, identify needs/potential/constraints of learning/teaching situation, identify skills and knowledge needed to function in the target situation, write syllabus/materials to exploit the potential of the learning situation in the acquisition of the skills and knowledge required by the situation, evaluate.

What is more, we should not neglect to answer the following questions before we decide to integrate the learning-centred approach to ESP: *When will the learner learn most effectively?, Can learning all language skills help the learner to gain the knowledge he might need?, Should we use variety of different activities?, How will learners react when doing tasks and exercises involving other skills besides the one that need analysis has shown to be the most important?, How will learners' attitudes vary during the course?, What will motivate them?.*

3. MATERIALS DESIGN

Being an ESP practitioner nearly always implies that you have to write your own learning-teaching materials. Generally the teacher writes the materials that suit her learners and their specific subject area. Unfortunately, there are few teachers who have acquired some materials writing skills and techniques.

Before we start writing our own learning-teaching materials we should probably consider a few principles of materials writing. Hutchinson and Waters (1987: 107) suggest materials should: encourage learners to learn, help organise the teaching-learning process, embody a view of the nature of language and learning, reflect the nature of learning task, have a useful function in broadening the basis of teacher training, provide models of correct and appropriate language use.

If we want our learning-teaching materials to stimulate our learners we should use interesting, various text, variety of activities that will activate our learners' thinking processes and allow the learners to use their existing knowledge and skills. Materials should be attractive, challenging and reliable; they should encourage fun and creativity (Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998), they need to be relevant, fresh and authentic. Authenticity is particularly important in ESP. When we talk about authentic materials we mainly think of printed, audio and video materials, basically materials that were not produced for teaching purposes, but are used in students' specialist professional or study situation (Robinson, 1991). Furthermore, materials should offer user-friendly meta-language. They should offer choice and maximise learning. They should be eased not simplified, as suggested by Bhatia (1980, quoted in Robinson, (1991: 56)) to match the learners' needs and the level of their knowledge. The learning-teaching materials should integrate cultural awareness and utilise our learners' own



subject specific knowledge or experiences. And finally, when writing materials we should never do things the learners can do themselves, and we should never forget that the materials simply must be manageable.



Based on the principles they have outlined, Hutchinson and Waters (1987: 108) suggest a model they have used for writing their own materials. They believe there are four elements to be considered: *input* (stimulus, new language items, correct models of language, a topic for communication, opportunity to use information processing skills, opportunities to use existing knowledge), *content* (language is a means of conveying information), *language* (enable students to use language) and *task* (communicative tasks in which learners can use the content and the language knowledge).

Gačić (2004:1,2) offers more scientific approach to course design by indicating three main levels of course design; *lexical, syntactic, and discourse-related*. The author clearly states that it is necessary to produce a corpus of spoken or written language, depending on the needs of language users. It is further suggested that for ESP teaching and materials design, corpora of forty or fifty thousand words are quite reliable since the vocabulary range is not so wide. Once a corpus is created ESP practitioners can select the language level, a word, a grammatical feature or any other specific text feature to be researched. However, not only corpora but also other reference materials such as dictionaries, grammars, lexicons, and scholarly writings should be used when preparing learning-teaching materials.

According to Gačić (2004) when we speak about lexical (word) level in corpus analysis, we think about frequency analysis and reducing low frequency words to obtain a word list, which enables producing of a minimal vocabulary – a vocabulary of the most frequently used and the most useful words in a field. The vocabulary is used as a lexical inventory when developing ESP learning-teaching materials. Special Thesauri, a register of most important vocabulary items, can be used in addition to the vocabulary, explains the author. The author suggests that concordances have proved to be an important instrument, since they show the words in their contextual environment; phrasal verbs, idioms and collocations can be identified easily.

Gačić (2004) also suggests that ESP practitioners analyse the text on the syntactic level. Syntactic analysis will help establish the most frequent and the most useful grammatical categories. That proved to be useful, since the length is a characteristic of the ESP text.

When creating our own learning-teaching materials we should consider discourse analysis as well. It is by no means easy. Gačić (2004) believes that readability is easily established, formal and linguistic characteristics of text types relevant to a specific field can be determined and systematically studied.

Once ESP practitioners decide to design a course and create learning-teaching materials, we should analyse the properties of the text (professional and scientific articles), which can be empirical, theoretical, review type or any other type, the author (Gačić, 2004) explains. Further, notions and functions expressed in the text should be explained, as well as ways of expressing definitions and hypotheses. Regarding text organisation, we should not forget to indicate the introduction, methods, discussion, conclusion and we most certainly must consider non-textual information, such as visual aids that can enormously contribute to

understanding of the material.

According to the author, we should not forget to consider the readability level of the text presented to the learners. The author suggests that ESP practitioners use three types of readability level assessment; calculations involving the sentence length and number of syllables, the „cloze” technique, and comparing a text with a word list (Gačić, 2004: 8). It should not be forgotten that the level of readability should be taken into account when designing learning-teaching materials.

We should, at this point contemplate over the following thought and re-consider our attitude to writing ESP learning-teaching materials:

„The ideal teaching material for an ESP course should contain authentic texts, covering minimal vocabulary, rich in the most frequent and most useful grammatical forms, with the intended readability level, covering appropriate text types and functions. By checking frequency, readability, style and text features we can see how close the materials are to the authentic text.” (Gačić, 2004:15)

4. GRAMMAR AND VOCABULARY

4.1. Grammar in ESP

ESP practitioners should probably, before starting an ESP course, contemplate few questions suggested by Dudley-Evans and St John (1998:74): *How much of the ESP teaching in your situation is concerned with grammar and vocabulary?, Which actual features of grammar should we teach?, What is your students’ attitude to grammar and vocabulary learning?, How far should we attempt to meet their wishes in this respect?*

Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) claim the assumption that ESP is not concerned with grammar is wrong. ESP learning-teaching should, whenever grammatical difficulties interfere with the learner’s ability to read, speak or write, help the learner overcome the difficulties, especially when accuracy is expected. What is more, ESP learning-teaching should derive from the notion that the language is used to communicate in meaningful situations (Skela, 1999). Thus, if our students have problems because of the poor grammatical knowledge, we should help them overcome the problems by teaching them grammar implicitly; for example, when the students work with certain material and use grammatical features that appear in the text, the teacher helps the students to learn and practise them, but does not direct their attention to the grammatical characteristics of the language (Skela, 1999). However, when accuracy is expected, we can teach grammar explicitly, whereby the teachers teach and explain grammatical rules (Skela, 1999) while using appropriate texts.

ESP practitioners should probably help their learners not only to understand grammatical rules, but also to apply them accurately in communicative situations. Some research has been done in this field. There are no set rules on which tenses to use, which verbs, voice or articles. However, ESP teachers should be sensitive to different context and particular uses of grammar that appear in them. We must never forget that it is the context that determines what aspect of grammar is appropriate (Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998).





ESP learning and teaching uses, to a certain degree, a restrictive grammar. Personal pronouns are mostly not used; modal verbs are not used in some styles, however sometimes widened grammar is used (e.g. legal English); doers of the action are expressed by nominalisation, neutralisation or passive expressions. ¹

4.2. Vocabulary in ESP

National curriculum anticipates that learning-teaching new vocabulary derives from the context, whereby learners can use different strategies to remember new words. The curriculum also states that learning new words should occur in subject specific target situations. Moreover, the curriculum suggests that learners can either recognise and understand new vocabulary or produce it while writing or speaking. The question that arises is, when do learners actually 'know' the word. Skela (1999) explains that learners know the word when they can: *understand it when written or spoken, recall it when needed, use its true meaning, use it grammatically correctly, pronounce it correctly, write it correctly, use it in the appropriate situation, and understand which words to use with it.*

Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) agree that it is not the ESP teachers' responsibility to teach technical vocabulary but it is their duty to check whether the learners have understood technical vocabulary appearing as carrier content for an exercise.

As we start preparing ESP course and selecting materials, we could perform a research and our teaching would most likely benefit from frequency counts, which would help us single out the most frequent words in the context.

„If you know what 1000 most frequent words in your field are, you cover 86% of the text. It gives good comprehension of the text without referring to the dictionary.”²

ESP practitioners should establish the minimal vocabulary wordlist as well as the list of the most important collocations (established expressions, characteristic in certain field), (Gačić, 2004).

5. EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT

According to Slovene national curriculum, which also regulates evaluation and assessment, learners' knowledge should be regularly assessed and evaluated. The curriculum suggests different kinds of tests and forms of assessment. It is clearly stated that teachers should help learners to develop learning strategies and monitor their progress by preparing exercises and tasks, which correspond to different learning strategies. When students are tested they should be able to show their knowledge and skills using the strategies they are most comfortable with. The curriculum further states that constant evaluation and assessment can help teachers decide on methods they use, exercises and task they prepare. The curriculum also instructs that language skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening, as well as the ability to use grammatical forms and vocabulary should constantly be monitored, evaluated

and assessed. Basically, ESP testing demands the learners to engage themselves authentically in test tasks, which are considerably related to the language they will need in professional situations, therefore, background knowledge (specific purpose content knowledge) might be called upon when the learners interpret the communicative situation and form their response to the task.

At this point we should probably mention Widdowson's (1979, 1983 as quoted in Douglas, (2000:17) explanation of the term authenticity. He basically suggests that we should distinguish between 'authentic' and 'genuine'. For example, if we take a manual to operate a car, it is an excellent piece of authentic material, but when it is used for purposes other than intended by the author, it becomes a genuine text. Thus, the car operating manual was not written to be a multiple-choice language test to evaluate the understanding and the use of imperatives, but it is still a genuine piece of material. Bachman (1991, as quoted in Douglas, (2000:17)) developed the notion of authenticity even further. It is suggested that authenticity is a function of an interaction between a language user and a discourse, and proposes two aspects of authenticity, situational and interactional. According to Douglas (2000: 18) in ESP testing both aspects should be present. Situational authenticity can be demonstrated by making the relationship between the test task characteristics and the features of tasks in the target language use situation explicit. The second aspect of authenticity, interactional, ... and involves the interaction of the test taker's specific purpose language ability (communicative ability) with the test task. Thus, a test might simulate a target language situation, but fails to engage learners into a meaningful communicative language use.

Douglas (2000:19) offers the following definition of specific purpose language tests:

„A specific purpose language test is one in which test content and methods are derived from an analysis of a specific purpose target language use situation, so that test tasks and content are authentically representative of tasks in the target situation, allowing for an interaction between the test taker's language ability and specific purpose content knowledge, on the one hand, and the test tasks on the other. Such a test allows us to make inferences about a test taker's capacity to use language in the specific purpose domain.”

Slovene national curriculum suggests that learners should monitor their progress and they should with their teacher's help analyse the difficulties they might have as well as plan activities to overcome the problems. However, it seems as if the current teaching practice is regarded to be responsible for the learners' failure or success. What is more, majority of learners rarely accept the responsibility for their learning. Unless we allow learners to be responsible for their learning, we cannot understand testing as suggested above. ESP teaching offers an opportunity to demonstrate that teachers are facilitators who can help learners use their specific subject knowledge while developing language skills, and allow learners to accept responsibilities regarding learning.

6. CONCLUSION

Obviously ESP is more than just needs analysis. What is more, ESP is more than just learning/teaching vocabulary that appears in specific fields. ESP is learning/teaching for the



purpose of communication in subject specific situations. Bearing this in mind ESP current practitioners should re-consider their teaching and try modifying it to the ideas suggested by different researchers from this field.



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FOOTNOTES

¹ Gačić, M., ESP lecture, Zagreb, 2004.

² Gačić, M., ESP lecture, Zagreb, 2004.

ENGLISKI KAO JEZIK STRUKE: POGLED IZ PRAKSE

Sažetak

Članak omogućuje uvid u slovensku reformu nastavnih planova te uz to preporučuje učenje engleskoga kao jezika struke i njegovo poučavanje kao pomoć učenicima u pripremanju za daljnje obrazovanje i/ili profesionalnu karijeru. U procesu učenja i poučavanja trebalo bi odrediti potrebe učenika te osmisliti tečajeve i materijale za učenje koji će im omogućiti ovladavanje jezikom potrebnim za aktivno sudjelovanje u njihovom profesionalnom, kao i društvenom, kulturnom i političkom životu. Članak se također bavi idejom evaluacije i ocjenjivanja. Naposljetku, članak sugerira kako poučavanje engleskog kao jezika struke pruža mogućnost da nastavnici budu osobe koje pomažu učenicima pri korištenju njihova poznavanja određenoga predmeta u razvijanju vlastitih jezičnih vještina te omogućuju učenicima da prihvate odgovornost za svoje učenje.

Ključne riječi: slovenski nacionalni nastavni plan, engleski kao jezik struke, procjena potreba, stvaranje materijala.



