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Developing ESP Materials for First-Year Non-English Major Students: A Case Study

prepared by



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Abstract

This study critically examines the development of language learning materials designed for non-English majors. The term “non-English majors” will be used throughout this study to refer to students of medicine, Engineering, business and science who attend the English class as a university requirement during the first year, previously referred as preparatory-year students. The study is descriptive in nature and based on a reflection of personal experience along with a theoretical perspective of material development as suggested by ESP and EAP experts. The researcher’s experience working with non-English majors for many years in as a language instructor has driven him to undertake this research. The researcher has witnessed several attempts made by the English Language Institute to find the most appropriate language materials for ESL and EFL students. However, there is no complete satisfaction from the educational stakeholders with any of the endeavors. Although extensive research has been conducted in this area, the focus has mainly been on analyzing and evaluating the existing instructional materials. A few studies have dealt with designing or selecting teaching materials for those whose majors are not English. To that end, the paper explicates some myths related to the design of language material for non-English majors. It first discusses the approach to teaching language to non-English majors to determine which approach to adopt: English for specific purposes (ESP) or general English (GE). After that, it highlights the language needs of non-English majors and its importance in developing language materials. It finally reviews the characteristics of effective language material developers. The paper concludes with recommendations for improving the existing language materials designed for non-English majors.

Keywords: ESP Materials, non-English majors, myths, material design, material selection.

1. Introduction

1.1 Objective and Problem Statement

The aim of this study is to critically examine the development of language learning materials designed for non-English majors. Although extensive research has been conducted in this area, the focus has mainly been on analyzing and evaluating the existing instructional materials. A few studies have dealt with designing or selecting teaching materials for those whose majors are not English. To that end, the paper explicates some myths related to the design of language material for non-English majors.

The study is descriptive in nature and based on a reflection of personal experience along with a theoretical perspective of material development as suggested by ESP and EAP experts. Several attempts have been made by the English Language Institute to find the most appropriate language materials for ESL and EFL students. However, there is no complete satisfaction from the educational stakeholders with any of the endeavors. This study offers some insights into the way the existing language materials for non-English majors could be improved.

Developing language learning materials for non-English majors falls into the category of “English for Specific/Academic Purposes” (ESP/EAP), because the materials are designed for learners who have specific academic needs. The debate about the development of language learning materials for non-English majors has received considerable critical attention in the applied linguistics literature. Currently, EFL teachers often use published textbooks in their English classes. However, instructional materials that are highly effective and responsive to students’ needs are sometimes unavailable. If teachers have clearly defined the learning objectives and identified the students’ needs, such a situation should not be an issue for them. Recognizing the learning objective and understanding the learners’ needs provide a starting point for teachers to develop their learning materials or adapt existing ones to better fit their students’ needs.

The researcher conceived of this study while working at Jazan University. As a lecturer, I have witnessed several attempts to adopt effective language-learning material for first-year

students whose majors are not English. Unfortunately, there is no complete satisfaction from the stakeholders (students and academic departments) with any of the endeavors.

Like other Saudi universities, new entrants to Jazan University are required to take an intensive English language course as a university requirement during the first year in order to meet the language proficiency requirements for their academic studies. These students have studied English as a foreign language for more than ten years, from the primary level through the intermediate and secondary levels. In addition, they have completed the secondary certificate and passed the General Aptitude Test (GAT) and the Academic Achievement Test prepared by the National Centre for Assessment (Qiyas) prepares the Academic Achievement Test as a requirement for admission to higher education institutions. Some are accepted as scholarship students according to the admission requirements. Having fulfilled the admission requirements, the students are assigned to different academic disciplines according to the weighted percentage of admission.

The English Language Institute (ELI) is the academic body responsible for providing English language instruction to first-year, non-English major students across the university. As mentioned before, the term “non-English majors” refers to those who are majoring in subjects other than English, such as medicine, engineering, business, and science, and who take English only as a university requirement. In other words, the two terms “non-English majors” and “ESP students” are almost interchangeable in this study.

The ELI’s goal is to prepare first-year non-English majors to use English for both academic and professional purposes. In addition, ELI functions following the Kingdom’s Vision 2030, which concentrates on providing students with the required knowledge and skillset to advance their academic and professional development. To that end, the university provides its students with intensive English language courses. The students are required to pass this course, which is intended to prepare students for content classes taught in English in their respective majors. The first-year Health Track students are offered three levels of the English course, in Level 1 and Level 2, the four language skills- reading, writing, listening and speaking, are introduced equally, with Level 3 focused on advanced writing skills such as essay writing.

2. Background

2.1 ESP Development

English language teaching or learning can broadly be classified as English for general purposes (EGP) and English for specific purposes (ESP) (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987; Strevens, 1988). English for specific purposes can be subdivided into two categories: English for academic purposes (EAP) and English for occupational purposes (EOP).

Historically, several language approaches and theories have been developed in the field of language teaching and learning, some of which have had a significant impact on the design of language materials for non-English major students. This section provides a broad overview of some major approaches.

Register analysis, for example, is an approach to language teaching that was developed between 1965 and 1974 and exerted a powerful influence over the development of language materials. This theory is mainly aimed at recognizing the grammar and vocabulary typical of technical registers. According to this theory, language features that students might have in

their studies through English medium were given priority in teaching and learning materials. For example, “*A Course in Basic Scientific English*” by J.R. Ewer and G. Latorre (1969) was one of the pioneering textbooks that were grounded on exploration of scientific texts and the collection of the most commonly occurring grammatical forms, structural words, and lexicon that were shared by all academic disciplines.

Discourse analysis (1974-1980) is another approach that was developed as a pedagogic theory. It mainly focuses on how sentences are employed in many aspects of communication and how certain linguistic patterns influence the statement’s articulation. The outcome of this theory led to the design of the series “*English in Focus*” by J.P. Allen and H.G. Widdowson (1973-1978). Subsequently, other series began with a portfolio of rhetorical purposes rather than grammatical or lexical features.

In the early 1980s, the notion of needs analysis (NA) started to gain popularity in the field of ESP. It has developed rapidly to incorporate not only students’ future needs but also students’ reasons for taking the course, as well as material availability, etc. NA is the core of any pedagogical practice related to teaching English to non-English majors. Further, Hutchison and Waters (1987) described it as “a starting point for all further activities”.

Moreover, the genuine concern of NA is not only to invite language experts to study the simple forms of the language but also to consider other structures, for example, the approaches that inspire language use and that familiarize users with the simple forms of the language. In other words, the tasks developed for that purpose should involve learners in processing authentic texts, as they would have to do in academia or the workplace, by adopting the skills and strategies that are crucial for the target situation and scrutinizing the way lexical items are encoded and decoded from texts whether written or spoken. The book series “*Reading and Thinking in English*” by J. Moore and T. Munévar (1979-1980) is a good example of integrating some of these perceptions into language pedagogy.

Therefore, language instructors are often challenged with the duty of either designing materials to meet the needs of their students or adapting available commercial ones. Language teachers may decide to replace those materials or complement them with other sources to facilitate language learning. Some language instructors assume that this approach might allow them to exploit authentic and motivating language input and engage learners in interesting and pedagogically sound tasks (Krajka, 2007).

In the late 1980s, a genre analysis approach was developed to examine the discourse as a structure of linguistic forms and choices. This theory has led to a variety of genre-based language materials and instructional activities. According to some linguists, genre analysis is a pedagogic theory that has been applied across a variety of settings to aid students in using genres to fulfill the socio-rhetorical goals of a writing task (Hyland, 2004; Paltridge, 2001, Swales & Feak, 1994). The goal of genre analysis practice is to enable learners to be more aware of how texts and social contexts are related to each other. Further approaches to genre analysis make use of ethnographic research to assist learners in developing insights into the principles, standards, and rhetorical trends of a particular discourse community (Swales, 1990).

This brief historical background illustrates the major phases that have paved the way to the development and emergence of ESP as an important approach to language learning.

2.2 ESP/EAP

ESP is an approach to language teaching and learning that is contrasting to the general English (GE). According to Hutchison and Waters (1987), ESP and GE are quite distinct from each other. One of the distinguishing features of ESP is the learners' specific needs. Therefore, needs analysis (NA) is essential to such courses. General English (GE), on the other hand, is described by some specialists (Jordan, 1997, Paltridge, Belcher, 2014, et al), as the teaching of English for no obvious reason. This notion refers to those language learning settings where learners have no apparent reason to learn the language. Moreover, GE is mostly used at school levels, where the students gain competence in a wide range of skills and are introduced to the structural and grammatical components of the language to pass the exams at the end of each year (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).

English for Science and Technology (EST) is one of the major areas of ESP. It is considered the predominant branch of ESP. Perhaps this is because it is the oldest, has the largest number of publications, and has the highest number of experts (Swales, J. 2004). The paradigm shift in the fields of business, finance, banking, economics, and accounting is another contributing factor to the importance of EST (Dudley-Evans and St John, 2009).

2.3 EAP/EOP

English for Academic Purposes EAP and English for Occupational Purposes EOP are considered the two main branches of English for Specific Purposes ESP. EAP is subdivided into disciplines such as English for Business studies, English for Health Science, English for Engineering. etc. EOP, on the other hand, is separated into English for Engineers, English for Doctors and Nurses, English for Bankers, etc. (Peacock and Flowedew, 2005). The clear distinction between the two approaches is that the former tends to be more instructional whereas the latter is rather operational. In other words, EAP courses are academic-oriented, designed and conducted in the academy, but EOP courses are vocationally-oriented. (Hutchinson and Waters, 1991). Since the primary concern of this study is to discuss EAP theory; it will be discussed in some detail in this section.

Hyland (2006) defined EAP as “specialized English language teaching that introduces the social, cognitive, and linguistic demands of targeted academic situations, providing focused instruction informed by an understanding of texts and the constraints of academic contexts”. Accordingly, EAP courses are apparently designed for students who plan to take a course in advanced study at the tertiary level; therefore, their curricula should be academic-oriented (Coxhead 1998 as cited in Peacock and Flowedew, 2005, p.260).

Moreover, the EAP program is based on student needs—that is, precise academic language and specific methods of oral and written communication that are exclusively used in texts and to express thoughts. This language aims to establish what Cummins (1979 cited Peacock and Flowedew, 2005, p.197-205) described as “cognitive academic language proficiency” (CALP). This linguistic style is grounded in the student's achievement of simple social communication skills. Lewelling (1991) claimed that developing high proficiency in general English is not enough to guarantee progress in academic institutions.

Experts (Beard & Hartley, 1984; Robinson, 1980) have expressed various views regarding the EAP focus; some professional view study skills as the core of EAP, while others deny that EAP wholly relies on study skills; instead, they consider it as “general academic English

register, that is, integrating a formal, academic style, with proficiency in the language use” (Jordan, 1997).

However, in some disciplines where specific linguistic features are required, the emphasis on non-specialized language may not be satisfactory for students to function effectively in that discipline. In other words, the needs of study skills vary according to the different levels of language proficiency. That is study skills that require a relatively large number of productive skills such as writing and speaking may need more language competence as compared to reading and listening. For instance, a writing task may require more integrated skills on the student’s part than other activities such as using a dictionary or note-taking skills.

2.4 EGAP/ESAP

Another key aspect of EAP is that it is conducted either as English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) or as English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) according to its context. EGAP is perfectly suitable for heterogeneous classes where students come from a range of disciplines. ESAP, on the other hand, is more appropriate in homogenous classes which are specifically designed to meet the needs of individual academic departments (Liyana, and Birch 2001).

In EGAP materials, tasks linked to skills such as understanding lectures and attending conferences are introduced separately, directing attention to the skills shared by all academic disciplines. Whereas in ESAP materials, skills that are effective in English for General Academic Purposes EGAP are integrated with the ones assist students in their real-world subject tasks. According to Dudley-Evans & St John, (1998), the distinction between the ESAP and EGAP materials is that the former focuses on the actual tasks that students have to carry out, while the latter concentrates on more general contexts.

In light of this theoretical background, the next section discusses myths related to language material developments for non-English majors in more detail.

3. Myths and Facts

Three common myths related to the development of language learning materials for undergraduate non-English majors will be discussed in this section.

3.1 Myth Related to the Approach in Language Material Development

The first myth in this discussion is about the approach to material development. Language learning materials specifically designed to non-English majors are often directed to a particular group of learners and to a specific academic community (Hyland 2006). Hence, material designers need to figure out the specific features of the language that should be taught to learners. This point poses the question of whether the teaching materials designed for non-English major students should adopt the general English approach or the English for Specific Purposes approach. This question has been at the center of fierce controversy among experts.

Some EFL teachers still believe the myth that Arab EFL learners are not adequately prepared to study through the English medium at university and thus need a refresher course in general English. Teachers claim that students usually join higher education institutions with a poor level of proficiency in English, and thus need a refresher course in general English. Al Shumaimeri (2003), for example, argues that Saudi EFL learners finish their schooling stage

with a low level of proficiency in English and are unable to use English accurately and fluently.

In an investigation into Saudi university students' perceptions of the first-year English program, McMullen (2014) found that the preparatory year (first year) students themselves admitted that they finished the secondary school level with little knowledge and skills needed to study their chosen majors in English. He added that they regularly complain that although they used to score good grades on high school English exams, they found themselves struggling with English language courses.

This particular myth is dispelled by a statement made by Peacock and Flowerdew, (2005: 17), that "if after years of learning English at the school level, a college student has still not mastered third-person subject-verb agreement or the article system, then curriculum developers are justified in moving on to more discipline-specific features". This view criticizes those who traditionally consider language an abstract system and only a resource for communication. General English (GE) and English for specific purposes (ESP) vary in different aspects, not only in the learner but also in the goals of instruction. For example, GE emphasizes all four language skills—listening, reading, speaking, and writing—equally, whereas ESP focuses on learners' needs, which determines which language skills are most needed by the students, and the learning materials are designed accordingly.

According to Cummins (1982 as cited in Hyland 2015) preparing students to study their major courses through English medium, language learning materials should follow what he labeled as "context-reduced" language. In other words, the English classes offered to such students should not rely heavily on a direct context, as does the "context-embedded" everyday language, which can be categorized as general English courses. Short & Spanos (1989), considered this point to be the clear distinction between ESP and GE curricula.

In light of this discussion, the assertion that first-year tertiary students are not proficient in English and are not ready to understand discipline-specific language and learning tasks is based on an inaccurate assumption and lacks clear evidence. Therefore, this assumption cannot be generalized. The dearth of research in this area has led many EFL teachers to assume that all students can be treated equally with the same standard approach. The reality is that non-English majors should be treated as ESP students rather than GE students, and the language learning materials should be developed based on this assumption. This argument is supported by Indika & Brich (2001), who stated that in situations where English is taught as a foreign language, almost all tertiary students attend EAP classes that are often arranged and designed to meet the needs and expectations of academic departments.

3.2 Myth Related to the Needs Analysis Process

Some educators raise doubts about the importance of needs analysis and its role in material design and selection. Many decision-makers as well as language teachers, particularly in the Arab world, underestimate the role of needs analysis as a professional practice. They argue that analyzing students' needs is not an absolute necessity and that this process has no purpose because commercial textbooks can be used. Moreover, they believe that specialists in the field often design commercial textbooks; therefore, they meet the needs of a large group of students and can be used instead of wasting time designing or tailoring specific instructional materials.

A consensus exists among language experts that analyzing learners' needs is central to materials design and selection (Hutchison, T., & Waters, A. 1987, Jordan, B. 1997. Dudley-Evans, T., & St John, M.-J. 1998. Hyland, K. 2002. Peacock and Flowerdew, 2005). For example, Li (2014) stressed that a well-designed curriculum should be based on an in-depth examination of the needs of learners, teaching institutions, and the community. According to Richards (2001:51), needs analysis is conducted to serve many purposes, such as measuring the levels of students, understanding the learning problems that learners are facing, and figuring out the gap between the learners' previous knowledge and what they need to learn. For this reason, Richards (2001) stressed that conducting a needs analysis is indispensable to any curriculum development process. Further, Richards (2001) criticized those who heavily rely on commercial textbooks, as they are usually prepared for global markets and may fail to address the real needs and interests of students.

Along the same lines, Alhamami M. and Ahmad (2018) conducted a study in the Saudi context in which they found that commercial textbooks used for EFL programs in Saudi Arabia need to be customized, revised, adapted, redesigned, and redeveloped to make them more responsive to learners' needs.

Hutchison and Waters (2010), among the early pioneers in the field of language materials development, stated that all language courses are based on perceived needs of some sort. In response to a question about what distinguishes ESP from general English, Hutchison and Waters (2010) stated that "in theory nothing, in practice a great deal." Another crucial point about NA is that some people believe that the needs of general English learners cannot be specified; Hutchison and Waters (2010), however, denied having this belief and stressed that it is possible to specify learning needs.

The general assumption is that no ideal language learning materials exist to use anywhere, anytime, for the same level of students. For this reason, teachers are advised to develop their instructional materials for their specific group of learners. If a teacher has to use commercial textbooks for some reason, he or she must adapt them to the learners' needs.

3.3 Myth Related to Language Materials Developers

Developing language materials and teaching language are two sides of the same coin; they are at the core of the teacher's responsibilities. Many people pose the question, "Should the EFL teachers or the specialists in the field design the teaching and learning materials for students who are not majoring English?" This question has been the subject of intense debate within the academic community because it brings up the question of specificity.

Many professionals have articulated thoughts about specificity in classes for non-English majors. Belcher (2006), for example, stated that the specificity in such situations refers to the perception of the language and skills that learners need in target situation. The two terms English for general academic purposes (EGAP) and English for specific academic purposes (ESAP) are introduced in the field.

According to the EGAP theory, language and task proficiency needs of students are viewed as "*common-core language*" and "*language learning schemes*" for an ever-expanding scope of changeable spheres and tasks. For those who support this attitude, such as Widdowson (1983) and Hutchinson and Waters (1987), believe that features of many ESP courses are

similar across the range of specializations. Thus, designing learning materials that can be used in different disciplines is more effective.

Some experts, (Dudley-Evans and St. John, 1998 and Hyland, 2002) viewed the language and task proficiency required in EAP classes as beneficial to specific areas of study and relevant to the purpose. Thus, concentrating mainly on what is called “*common-core*” characteristics of specific English appears to be unsatisfactory for them. Additionally, students are probably more interested if such classes complement lectures, homework, or other tasks in other classes. In this way, students benefit from more than being taught general skills. By revisiting the discourse analysis theory, reliable evidence shows that within academic disciplines, even within similar disciplines, there are distinct aspects that differentiate it from others (Dudley-Evans, 1997).

This section briefly reviews the viewpoints of the subject specialist as well as the language professionals on who should develop language material for non-English majors.

To begin, some teachers believe that subject specialists should design language materials for non-English majors. This group argued that a subject specialist who possesses some linguistic mastery is more qualified than a language teacher because he/she is much more familiar with the specialist terms and topics of the discipline. They also believe that the ultimate goal of such courses is to equip learners with technical texts in their specializations. Halliday (1994 as cited Hyland 2009, p. 194) for example, stated that dealing with language materials for non-English majors requires specialist knowledge. They further point out that the meanings of some lexical items may hide behind the rules of technical language and can only be perceived by subject specialists who possess expert knowledge. However, these relationships are unclear for language teachers. Likewise, Myers (1991) observed that technical knowledge is also essential to comprehend the consistency within the text in a technical context because the interrelation in these discourses may be vague for a language educator.

On the other hand, language professionals often deny this claim. They strongly believe that materials used in classes for non-English majors are solely the responsibility of language teachers since it is an independent discipline and has its specific practices and rules, such as teaching methodology, language approaches, language assessment, etc. Therefore, those who want to teach language courses for non-English majors NEMs must be aware of the fundamental principles of language teaching. In other words, just being fluent in English is not enough to be qualified. Subject specialists, even with good language proficiency, who lack techniques for language teaching, will not be successful language teachers. In other words, English classes for NEMs should focus on language teaching and not Specific subject contents (Peacock and Flowedew, 2005, p. 94).

None of these views reflects reality; such myths are largely due to the lack of cooperation between academic and language departments. Dudley-Evans (1984 as cited in Peacock and Flowedew, 2005, p. 227) suggested a close liaison between language departments and subject content departments on the basis that the EFL teacher can only perform such tasks effectively if there is active cooperation with subject teachers. Technically, such a practice is known as “team teaching” (Dudley-Evan & St John, 1998). According to Dudley-Evan and St. John (1998), this liaison falls into three categories: cooperation, collaboration, and team teaching.

- Cooperation refers to sharing knowledge from the academic departments about the content of the course, the tasks that students are expected to perform, and the department’s expectations related to its discourse community.

- Collaboration involves language instructors and specialists working together to suggest specific activities in the ESAP class.
- Team teaching means that the language teacher and the subject specialists are mutually responsible for the ESAP class. This particular type of liaison is less likely to work because subject specialists, especially those from medical departments, may not accept such initiatives.

This review dispels the myth that developing language learning materials for non-English majors are the sole responsibility of language teachers. Content departments and subject specialists should also be given a key role in developing language materials for non-English majors.

Conclusion

The main goal of this study was to discuss some myths related to developing language learning materials for non-English majors. The findings from this study provide new insights into how language materials are developed and selected based on professional standards rather than on personal judgment and intuition. The study suggested that adopting a more flexible approach with discipline-specific orientation such as English for General Academic Purposes and English for Specific Academic Purposes will be a significant benefit for the students. The study also suggested that content departments should be allowed to make contributions to the process of developing language materials for non-English majors. Perhaps, if more cooperation is maintained between the ELI and the content departments, the language learning materials will be more effective. For example, the content departments can provide information about the content, specific activities and the proficiency level that students should have in order to communicate effectively in the subject area.

Implications

The current study was a theoretical investigation to examine some key aspects of the development of learning language materials for non-English majors. It was based on documentation method reflecting the researcher's personal experience and the theory of ESP material design, a large-scale of empirical study involving students from different university's academic departments is recommended to ensure that the language materials in use are effective and responsive to the needs of the students. The current study has briefly discussed the academic departments' role in developing language materials, further investigation is required to determine exactly how the English Language Institute ELI and the academic departments cooperate in the process of development of language learning materials.

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