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Derya Tuzcu Eken

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Evaluation of an ESP coursebook for students of computer programming

Derya Tuzcu Eken
Kırklareli University
Turkey

Correspondence to: derya.tuzcu@klu.edu.tr

Abstract. Choosing the right coursebook appropriate to the students' interests, levels and goals of the course is difficult in most cases. The aim of this paper is to evaluate the coursebook 'English for Information Technology 1: Vocational English Coursebook' which has been planned to be used at Kırklareli University - Luleburgaz Vocational College. The students are Computer Programming students who have a basic knowledge of General English (GE) and need an elementary English course at their field. The aim of the research is to decide on the efficacy and appropriateness of this coursebook to the overall aims of this specific course. In order to achieve this, the checklist designed by McDonough, Shaw and Masuhara (2013) has been used. As a result, it was found that in general the coursebook is suitable to the goals of the course and sometimes with necessary supplementation it can be much more beneficial.

Keywords. Basic level, computer programming students, coursebook evaluation, english for special purposes.

1. Introduction

English for Special Purposes (ESP) is different from English as a Second or Foreign Language (ESL, EFL) and the most important difference lies in the learners and their motives for learning English. ESP learners are generally adults or young adults who have already had General English (GE) knowledge and are learning the language for their professional, job-related life. The Computer Programming students as ESP learners therefore taking vocational English course need more language in context covering subjects such as parts of computer systems, websites, databases... than grammar and language structures irrelevant to their interest and the aims of the course.

However, it is mostly hard to find appropriate ESP materials for ESP students with basic knowledge of English. Besides the materials at this field have to be updated very often because of the improvements at technology and such an update is not always possible because of economic reasons. Therefore the coursebooks written for Computer Programming department such as 'Basic English for Computing (Glendinning and McEvan)' latest update at 2002 and 'English for Computing (Boeckner and Brown)' latest update at 2001 are the mere ones at the area and as is seen they do not have recent versions. Thus, in our vocational foreign language course, after using the above mentioned books for a few years which turned out to be out of date, 'English for Information Technology 1: Vocational English Coursebook' is being planned to be used. As a result, it is decided to be necessary to evaluate this coursebook's strengths and weaknesses.

In this context, the composition of this paper involves the characteristics of ESP materials, student - teacher roles, basic level computer programming students, the coursebook evaluation, findings and conclusion.

2. The characteristics of ESP materials

Taking part at different branches of the same trunk, ESP and GE coursebooks may seem very different from each other. This is mostly because of the content of the ESP books and the balance of skills being developed (Cunningsworth 1995). The main difference between ESP and GE is that ESP is an approach to language teaching in which content, materials, techniques and

VI. LSP teaching and training

D. Tuzcu Eken

methods of language learning are based on the learners' reasons of learning (Hutchinson and Waters 1987). ESP learners are learning the language for their future job-related needs and they are aware of their needs. On the other hand GE course aims to enable students to develop their all-round language skills in the target language in order to make students speak foreign language outside of the classroom.

The characteristics that is peculiar to ESP has been identified by many professionals. Yet it is enough to mention only one of them which is said to be modified version of previous ones. At 1997 Japan Conference on ESP, Dudley-Evans (1998) made a distinction between absolute and variable characteristics of ESP and arranged them as follows.

Absolute Characteristics:

- ESP is planned according to the private needs of the learners;
- ESP uses the necessary methodology and activities of the disciplines being served;
- ESP is based on the necessary language, skills, discourse and genres in order to serve these activities.

Variable Characteristics:

- ESP especially deals with or might be related to specific disciplines;
- ESP's methodology or techniques might be different from GE methodologies;
- ESP is mostly designed for adult learners; yet, it could be applicable for learners at secondary school level;
- ESP is generally used for intermediate or advanced levels;
- Though being in need of some basic knowledge of the language rules, it can be used with beginners, too. (Dudley-Evans 1998: 4-5).

Although most of the above mentioned characteristic may apply to the features of GE, ESP materials are expected to be in advance of GE materials, as they specially have been prepared to meet the specific needs of a specific group of students and these could not be met completely by GE materials (Cunningsworth 1995).

3. Student - teacher roles

The roles of teachers and students are to some extent different from those in GE course's. It is mostly because that experts in the field do not have enough English skills to give the course which is also the reason that we need ESP courses (Madeleine 2007:454-455). Besides even they have the good English skills still they are not language experts which means that if teaching a language is so simple, everybody knowing the target language could also teach it. However, in order to teach a language one should be aware of the language such as knowing the language items, knowing the properties of a language, having an education on language teaching methodologies and so on. Though, English teachers giving ESP courses are good at not only English but also the system of that language, yet they do not have enough knowledge about the specific area of vocation. This is the most important problem that we have in ESP classes.

ESP teachers on one hand, as Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) suggest, have five important roles in teaching environment: "teacher, course designer and materials designer, collaborator, researcher, evaluator." Some of the roles mentioned here might be similar to the ones necessary in teaching GE but when it comes to teaching in a specific area teachers need that specific knowledge at first in order to carry out these roles efficiently.

ESP students on the other hand as mentioned before are mostly adult or young adults and have established in their professions and are good at their subject knowledge that the teacher does not have (Cunningsworth 1995). At this point, it seems that the students' and the ESP teachers' roles

coincide which means that in order for an effective course they have to collaborate by pooling their knowledge and expertise.

To sum up, the role of a teacher in ESP class is to: organize programs, set goals and objectives, establish a positive learning environment, evaluate students' progress and what ESP students bring to class are these: focus for learning, subject matter knowledge, adult learning strategies (Schleppegrell, M. and Bowman 1986).

4. Basic level computer programming students

As mentioned before most of the ESP learners are thought to have at least intermediate level of English. However, in Turkey in most of the Vocational Colleges as in our school, students do not have enough knowledge of English when they come to higher education. Thus at their first year, we give them an elementary course of English and also Computer Programming students in this case get an elementary course in their first year. They get four hours of course in a week in GE and in both terms of an academic education year. However, in their second year they are expected to have two hours course of Vocational English which is expected to be arranged by the course teacher.

With the development of technology every year new things come and go so as the materials should be renewed in this field. Though the changes, the coursebooks are not renewed every year and in turn being ineffective in the field. As teachers of English teaching ESP we try to choose, adapt, design and supply appropriate materials by taking the methods and approaches of language teaching, especially ESP, into consideration.

5. The coursebook evaluation

In order to evaluate the coursebook, a checklist designed by McDonough and Shaw in 1993 and reedited by McDonough, Shaw and Masuhara (2013) are used. The reasons of choosing this checklist are these; it is the one in the area that has been renewed recently and it is found comprehensive enough to evaluate a coursebook when compared to the other existing checklists.

According to Cunningsworth (1995) though the content of ESP books may look different from that of GE coursebooks, and the skills being developed may have a different balance from those in GE coursebooks, the guidelines for the evaluation of these coursebooks may be used for ESP materials. Although McDonough, Shaw and Masuhara's checklist is not designed especially for ESP coursebooks, it can be used for this purpose because of its being comprehensive enough to do so.

The checklist is composed of two parts: 'External Evaluation' and 'Internal Evaluation'.

5.1. The external evaluation

The external evaluation as is evident from its name, is the general examination of organization of the coursebook. It is in a way, reading and thinking on author's /publisher's explicitly stated ideas about the book. In order to do this, first we need to look at the explanations or the claims made at the cover of teacher's/student's book and the introduction and content table (McDonough and Shaw 2003). While examining we have to keep in mind that the claim of the book and what it really includes should support each other. Below external evaluation items are listed and examined according to mentioned coursebook.

1. The intended audience

The book does not have an 'Introduction' part but at the back cover of the book, the audience is said to be students in vocational education and also company employees in training at work.

2. The proficiency level

It is written on the book that it is designed for basic level students who now require an elementary (CEF A1-A2) English course at their field of study.

3. The context of material use

The context of the book is claimed to be composed of topics about the latest developments in information technology and relevant to students' needs.

4. The presentation and organization of language

The book consists of 8 units and each unit is divided into 5 subheadings. Each unit is a combination of all skills: listening, reading, speaking, writing, vocabulary and also grammar. Every unit ends with a 'business matter' page. These pages especially focus on using the language and context that is learned in the units.

5. The author's views on language and methodology

It is said by the author that the book combines a strong grammar syllabus with the specialist vocabulary activities with language skills that learners need to succeed in their field. It appears that this textbook is aimed to focus on grammar structures of English and vocabulary exercises and at the same time the author tries to include these into the skills development exercises.

6. Are the materials to be used as the main 'core' course or to be supplementary to it?

English for IT coursebook is designed as a 'core' coursebook and it is supplemented by a CD-Rom with interactive glossaries in British and American English and full coursebook audio in mp3 format, on-line supportive materials for teachers including teacher's notes, editable tests and multi-lingual glossaries.

7. Is a teacher's book in print and locally available?

There is not an available printed teacher's book but on-line backup for teachers is available.

8. Is a vocabulary list/index included?

Vocabulary list is not included in the coursebook, instead there is an interactive glossary which comes with CD-Rom of the course package.

9. What visual material does the book contain and is it there for cosmetic value only or is it integrated into the text?

There are necessary amount of real photographs and some drawings on the pages and they are not used for aesthetic value. They are there because of making a connection with the text and to evoke students' curiosity and give them some clues about the exercises.

10. Is the layout and presentation clear or cluttered?

The layout of pages are clear and they are ordered in the same way. For instance, each unit has a topic and that topic is divided into titles and each title is processed with various exercises, texts and so on.

11. Is the material too culturally biased or specific?

Though this is not a GE coursebook in which we might come across cultural aspects mostly, teaching how to communicate with people of different nationalities, how to use the right words to speak politely are aimed.

12. Do the materials represent minority groups and/or women in a negative way?

As the book is on business this question can be discussed as whether the book gives place to businesswomen or not. At this point it can be said that the book includes

businesswomen photographs and in most of the listening dialogues there is a woman character, so it represents women in a positive way.

13. What is the cost of the inclusion of digital materials?

As the digital materials are available on-line and the CD-ROM is included inside the book we do not need to pay extra money for them.

14. The inclusion of tests in the teaching materials; would they be useful for this particular learners?

The online editable tests are a good way of practising what has been learnt yet, as said by the writers they can be editable and as teachers we might sometimes need to make slight changes to make the exercises more attractive or more appropriate to our students. Besides students may solve these tests on their own.

5.2. The internal evaluation

This analysis is aimed to investigate the material deeply. This kind of analysis is expected to be made in order to analyse the extent to which prementioned factors at the external evaluation stage match up with internal consistency and organization of the materials stated by the author/publisher (McDonough, Shaw and Masuhara 2013).

1. The presentation of the skills

Though they are not given separately in content page, all skills of language are integrated in the units. For example, in content page, unit one is divided into three categories: function, language and vocabulary. However, when we look into the unit it starts with a speaking activity which asks students to think about their country's greeting custom. Then in the second activity there is a fill-in reading dialogue on greeting people and after that students listen to and repeat a dialogue which is followed by an introducing yourself (speaking) activity and so on. Another page starts with a new subtitle of the unit and this is organized in the same way. Thus after examining all the units it is observed that all the skills in the book are integrated and given importance. Yet activities to improve listening and speaking skills seems to be given more than the reading and writing but this is parallel to our students' needs and course's aims.

2. The grading and sequencing of the materials

There is not a word in the book that claims to have a grading system. Yet after analysing, it can be said that Unit 1 starts with 'Introducing Yourself' which is associated with working environment and 'present simple tense'. Unit 2, titled 'Computer Systems' includes 'comparatives, superlatives, present continuous' and this shows us that the units are organized around language structures ranging from simple present to present perfect. In a way, this kind of grammatical arrangement seems to be based on from easier structures to more difficult ones and besides students' level of language is taken into consideration while choosing the grammatical structures. This lack of especially detailed grading and sequencing of topics does not effect anything in our teaching environment.

3. Where reading/ 'discourse' skills are involved, is there much in the way of appropriate text beyond the sentence?

The reading texts are given in contexts and appropriate to the relevant topic such as data storage, transaction security, IT career and so on... which are also linked to writing, vocabulary, and speaking activities. Besides with the help of these texts scanning, skimming, identifying skills are practiced. Also there are lots of dialogues that take students into the working environment and give them some practise on possible working environment language.

4. Where listening skills are involved, are recordings 'authentic' or artificial?

The texts of listening materials is not authentic but it seems that the writer has tried to make them appropriate to the real ones. Besides in some listening texts the people are from different culture so as the performers try to perform the listening to seem that they are foreigners. For instance in one of the texts there is a person from Kuwait and the one voicing him try to sound like he is Kuwaiti.

5. Do speaking materials incorporate what we know about the nature of real interaction or artificial dialogues offered instead?

The speaking dialogues are often related to the office environment and they represent a possible situation that the learners are going to be in when they are working in the future, for example, practising a phone call to the company IT help desk or talking about a problem with your computer. In a way there are lots of role play activities which encourage students to use the language that has just learned and apply it to a real dialogue.

6. Are the tests and exercises related to (1) learner needs and (2) what is taught by the course material?

As the students using the coursebook are elementary learners and in need of this level vocational English, it can be said that the tests and exercises all are related to the needs of learners. Also the things that the coursebook teachers and practices are interrelated.

7. Do you feel that the material is suitable for different learning styles... and is it sufficiently 'transparent' to motivate both students and teachers alike?

Generally there are three types of learners: visual learners, auditory learners and tactile (kinesthetic) learners.

Visual learners learn best with pictures, photographs, diagrams and drawings and they mostly take notes by drawing charts, graphics or pictures about the things they see and learn. The coursebook that is being analyzed includes activities that appeal to students of this learning type. For instance, an activity asks learners to make a chart of a passage after reading in order to summarize it. Also listening-reading texts or such kind of activities include pictures or photographs and in another activity the vocabulary is shown in boxes.

Auditory learners learn by listening. This kind of learners repeat what has been listened in order to insure permanent learning. Listening texts or role play activities in the coursebook can be beneficial to this kind of learners.

Tactile learners, on the other hand, learn by doing, touching. This kind of learners can not focus on the lesson unless they take part in. For this kind of learners learning environment can be arranged as a real office environment and we can ask them to take part in role play activities that is given in the book. The course teachers are great importance in learning situations for this learners in order to give them a chance to attend the activity.

6. Findings and conclusion

After examining the book both externally and internally, it is observed that things that the author/publisher claim are observed in the coursebook. After using some units of it in class, it is seen that students attend the lesson and try to do the exercises both in groups and individually. The activities are found appropriate to the interests and levels of the students and the activities are also approved for the aims of the course.

As for the price of course package when compared to the coursebooks at the same field in

VI. LSP teaching and training

D. Tuzcu Eken

our country, this coursebook is affordable and when I sent an e-mail to the Publisher they immediately answered back.

In sum, though in some situations students found it easy to use their own language as usual, generally they tried to speak in English while doing the exercises.

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