

Marija Meršnik
University of Belgrade, Serbia

Paper received: 15.10.2023
Paper revised: 12.12.2023
Paper accepted: 26.01.2024
Paper published: 15.06.2024

Danijela Đorđević
University of Belgrade, Serbia

Jelena Anđelković
University of Belgrade, Serbia

TAILOR-MADE ESP TEACHING MATERIALS FOR HEIs – TWO CASE STUDIES

Abstract

Commercially available teaching materials for Languages for Specific Purposes typically aim to cater to the needs of a wide range of students, even within a specific professional area. Therefore, when dealing with a more specialized purpose, as is the case with two Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) under review in this paper, additional time, resources, and effort are required to produce more tailored materials that suit the needs of specific target groups. This paper presents two case studies of ESP teaching materials design resulting in the creation of two tailor-made coursebooks used in two Serbian HEIs specializing in agriculture and food technology, and management, respectively. The paper outlines the materials writing process and compares the final products (i.e. the two ESP coursebooks) by encompassing various aspects, including course rationale and syllabi (such as learning outcomes, aims and objectives, students' entry levels, syllabi framework types, etc.), approaches to needs analysis, content choice and sequencing, copyright and other issues, theoretical and methodological frameworks, the timeline and the steps in the process. Despite the differences in target groups, teaching content, learning outcome, established frameworks, etc., the two writing processes and their final products underwent similar steps and identified comparable limitations and areas of improvement. Both processes also share a key takeaway: tailor-made ESP coursebook writing process, though arduous and time-consuming, is an effort worth taking.

Keywords: ESP, materials design, coursebook design, teaching materials

1 Introduction

The issue of materials development has been evolving ever since the field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) established itself within the English teaching community. Large publishing houses offer numerous one-size-fits-all coursebooks, which is understandable given the cost of coursebook production and the necessity to cater to diverse markets and learning contexts. Hence, ESP teachers working in more specialized or more nuanced contexts benefit more from using specifically designed materials “meant for specific learner groups with homogeneous linguistic needs, who study English for a specialized type of academic work (e.g. writing summaries, research articles, technical reports) or professional needs (negotiating a merger, producing software documentation, engaging in courtroom debate)” (Srinivas, 2021, p. 63). They are therefore faced with a challenge to either adapt the coursebooks available or write their own materials to cater to their specific target group of students and consequently make them more useful and applicable. Both of these undertakings are laborious and time-consuming processes, making it rare for individual teachers to have the time and resources to pursue them independently.

ESP is strongly oriented towards students and their needs. This is the reason why materials selection or materials writing should align with these identified needs. Since “the goal of an ESP course is to prepare the learners to carry out a specific task or a set of tasks” (Richards, 2001, p. 33), teaching materials should address these future professional settings. ESP instructors are therefore faced with a difficult task, since identifying students’ future professional settings requires a constant reevaluation of the teaching context, specific student needs and materials at hand. This further leads to the question of whether to use existing published materials, adapt published materials, or write one’s own. The answer would be to look at what the specific students’ needs are, and to what extent they could be met by using coursebooks offered on the market.

Commercially published coursebooks offer many advantages but have several drawbacks. On the one hand, they are a product of large teams with substantial time and resources at their disposal, whose product offers an inexperienced ESP instructor firm structure and guidance. On the other hand, publishers tend to avoid producing materials for niche markets (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987) for the very same reasons of time and resources invested in them, leaving those working in more specialized contexts with limited resources. Another observed drawback of such coursebooks is that they are usually *international* in focus and may not be relevant to the local culture (Srinivas, 2021). However, teachers may find themselves “dealing with content in an occupation or subject of study that they themselves have little or no prior knowledge of” (Basturkmen, 2010, p. 7), which adds another layer of complexity to the writing of these materials.

Since the field of ESP has been evolving for decades, the materials design methodology has also been improving and offers guidance in terms of the process as a whole, down to individual units. Three general stages outlined by Richards (2001, p. 145) suggest developing a course rationale, describing entry and exit levels, and choosing course content. Expanding on this notion and recognizing the non-linear nature of materials writing, Jolly and Bolitho (2011, p. 112) present a dynamic five-step sequence. The process begins with teachers identifying learner needs, followed by an exploration of the specific areas of need, encompassing

language, meanings, functions, skills, and more. The next steps involve realizing the new materials in a contextual setting, followed by pedagogical implementation through suitable exercises and activities. The final step culminates in the physical production of the materials. As for a typical unit, according to Srinivas (2021, p. 65), it usually follows a specific structure: it is organized around a topic, objectives are stated at the beginning as learning outcomes, it has a starter which serves as a lead-in to the topic, followed by form-focused activities, and the tasks are arranged in a logical sequence. Regardless of the methodology adopted, the ESP instructors are faced with a complex task when embarking on the journey of materials adaptation or materials writing since they are required to take into account and follow a complex set of procedures.

Although the issue of materials writing is a pressing one in ESP, there have been scarce reports on how teachers develop these materials. Basturkmen and Bocanegra-Valle (2018) give accounts of interviews conducted with ESP teachers to find out about their explicit as well as implicit beliefs with regard to this process. Their findings show that prior to materials writing, ESP teachers had consultations with subject experts. Some of the aspects the teachers highlighted as important for learning were practice activities, active involvement of the learner in the learning process, targeting language needs relating to the learners' disciplinary or professional worlds, and the use of authentic texts and tasks. Most, if not all of the insights from this report, correlate to the beliefs of the authors of coursebooks surveyed in this article, showing there is a common core of explicit beliefs in ESP instructors regardless of their teaching context.

The findings of numerous authors highlight the benefits of this extensive and demanding process. Materials writing, as reported by Srinivas (2021), offers an opportunity for professional development. Salazar (2017) emphasizes its role in providing practice in writing tailor-made materials as part of a course assignment during graduate studies. Bielousova (2017) underscores how materials writing enables ESP instructors to provide more relevant materials to their specific contexts. Additionally, Garcia Laborda (2011) demonstrates how the abundance of online materials supports ESP instructors in enriching students' learning experiences.

This report aims to show two sets of authors working in very specific ESP contexts and their separate yet very similar journeys in designing coursebooks for their respective teaching contexts (Agriculture and Food Technology, and Management), the problems encountered during the process, and the key takeaways from this experience. First, we describe the materials writing process, delineating steps before, during, and after writing. This is followed by a brief discussion of the principal insights and a conclusion, which are very similar in both instances.

2 Materials writing process

The main reasons for deciding to write our own materials as opposed to using readily available coursebooks were the complexity of topics to be covered and the diversity of students these materials are intended for. Upon initial discussions, the authors have established the framework of their individual underlying knowledge of the students' needs, curriculum design strategies, the final format of the coursebook, unit structure, and assessment format. An attempt was made to map the stages of the process and anticipate the potential pitfalls.

Deadlines were set, adding at least 20% more time to the due date for each step. This was done to account for any bottlenecks which may occur during the writing process, in order to meet the final deadlines. Overall duration of the work on materials research writing and editing took around a year and a half in both cases. The process of working on the respective materials can be divided into three simple steps, which will be expanded on in more detail in the subsequent subheadings:

- 1) before writing,
- 2) while writing, and
- 3) after writing.

2.1 Before writing

At the very beginning, an extensive literature survey was conducted in both teaching contexts. This included an analysis of the existing coursebooks and syllabi available to the authors from the field of Management and business-related disciplines as well as Agriculture and Food Technology. The authors collected published ESP coursebooks by colleagues from the University of Belgrade and other Serbian universities, which covered a wide range of disciplines such as Economics, Civil Engineering, Medicine, etc. The books were surveyed for content, organization, scope, literature, etc. to benchmark the drafts of individual coursebooks in the making. The same was done with coursebooks by well-known publishers (Cambridge University Press, Oxford University Press, Macmillan, Pearson Longman) in similar disciplines.

Having done a systematic review of available literature, the authors went on to survey the content of courses offered to students (both undergraduate and master's degree). This was done by reviewing course syllabi available through university websites. The process yielded information on the students' expected content knowledge and helped complete a tentative list of topics covered in specialized subjects. The investigation encompassed an examination of the content pertaining to both mandatory and optional courses, undertaken to ensure that students possess the necessary background knowledge to comprehend the materials intended for inclusion in the coursebook. Domain experts, i.e., colleagues from various subject fields, were consulted at different stages of the literature review to validate whether the decisions made on the selected content and topics were of sufficient utility for students. This was done throughout the writing process to ensure that the bulk of knowledge selected for each Unit of the coursebooks matched student needs. Colleagues who were consulted teach either undergraduate or graduate (or both) courses in a particular area a specific Unit covers.

The agreed entry level of student proficiency at the beginning of each course was established to be at a minimum of B1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for them to be able to follow the course content. However, students at said level could have difficulty with some segments of the programs since they mainly target B2 CEFR level students.

The teaching context differed vastly depending on the university, the level of studies, and the number of students attending the course, therefore, decisions made during the next stage,

the materials writing process, had to be adapted accordingly. Table 1 shows a comparative overview of each context. As shown here, the Agriculture and Food Technology coursebook was meant to serve both undergraduate and master's degree students, so the choice of topics and texts was far more diverse than those selected for the Management students. The overall level authors were aiming for in both cases was between B1 and B2 according to CEFR.

Table 1
Comparative overview of two HEIs teaching contexts

| Agriculture and Food Technology students | | Management students |
|--|--|---|
| Course book | <i>Seed, Breed, Feed and Succeed: English for Agriculture and Food Technology Students</i> | <i>Organize Your English for Management</i> |
| ECTS | 6 (undergraduate studies) / 5 (master's degree studies) | 6 (undergraduate studies) |
| Semester | I / II / III (undergraduate studies); I (master's degree studies) | II (undergraduate studies) |
| No. of classes | 2+0, 2+2 (undergraduate studies); 3+0 (master's degree studies) | 2+2 (undergraduate studies) |
| No. of Students | Appox. 200 (undergraduate studies); Approx. 80 (master's degree studies) | Approx. 400 (undergraduate studies) |
| Students' entry level | majority - B1 (CEFR) | majority - B1-B2 (CEFR) |

Although it seems counterintuitive, the authors have decided on a definite assessment format early on in the planning process of materials writing, following the suggestions found in Brown (2006) who states this is an efficient direction in syllabus design. Both Agriculture and Food Technology and Management students were to obtain a portion of their grade through formative assessment during the semester, and a final exam at the end of the semester (written for Agriculture and Food Technology students, and online via the *Moodle* platform, on Faculty premises, for Management students).

2.2 While writing

The writing process yielded two very different products in the two contexts discussed. The process is described in more detail in the following paragraphs, in terms of the sources used, unit content and structure, and intended future use. Given the difference in subject fields, the coursebooks are first described individually, followed by a brief comparison.

2.2.1 *Seed, Breed, Feed and Succeed: English for Agriculture and Food Technology Students*

As for *Seed, Breed, Feed and Succeed: English for Agriculture and Food Technology Students*, a selection of forty units has been made to acquaint students with fundamental English terminology relevant to their respective fields of study. This selection was made considering

the students' existing knowledge levels and the applicability of the terms in their future use of English. The texts used in these units were primarily abridged or sourced from English subject textbooks, the official European Commission website, and AGRIVI blogs. This variety aimed to illustrate the diverse contexts in which ESP is employed.

Each unit consisted of a text centered around a specific topic, accompanied by related exercises (see Table 2). The topics covered in these texts spanned a wide array of fields crucial to contemporary agriculture and food technology. These encompassed disciplines such as chemistry, biochemistry, soil management, plant cultivation, biotechnology, environmental sciences, plant protection, animal science, agricultural engineering, agricultural economics, and food technology. Although it was not feasible to cover all potential areas of interest comprehensively, the expectation was that the content presented in the textbook would sustain the students' enthusiasm for developing ESP skills. Additionally, the textbook includes an English-Serbian glossary featuring the most pertinent terms from the texts, available at the end of the book.

The primary objective of the coursebook for students was to assist them in enhancing their receptive skills, particularly in reading specialized texts, and acquiring relevant specialized vocabulary. Additionally, the textbook and its associated courses were designed to foster the development of productive skills, including speaking and writing. By the end of each unit, students were expected to navigate specialized texts independently, locate specific information effortlessly, employ agricultural and food technology terminology in diverse contexts, and compose brief paragraphs on a variety of specialized subjects.

2.2.2 Organize Your English for Management

The Management students coursebook *Organize Your English for Management* has seven Units, with the first six further divided into two sections. The units cover a wide range of topics related to students' main area of studies, including International Business (Globalization & Culture), Organization (Organizational structure & Work environment), Careers (Job search & Work), Products (Operations & Quality), Money (Finances & Sales), Communication (Marketing & Crisis communication), Digital. Each Unit starts with a Unit overview offering students an insight into the key terminology (see Table 2). The coursebook was designed in such a way that Unit 7 (Digital) offered an opportunity to connect the knowledge acquired throughout the course in a pair work or small groupwork project. This unit offers students a task which encompasses all skills and vocabulary acquired during the semester and allows them to apply this knowledge in a creative yet structured manner.

Units are separated by two "Test your knowledge sections" (Grammar test and a Vocabulary test) for revision after the first three and the second three Units. At the end of the coursebook, there is a "Learn more" section which contains a "Grammar file", a "Vocabulary file", and a "Writing file" – with additional information on grammatical and lexical aspects of the content covered in the Units, including a brief outline of the key rules in business writing.

In line with the integrated syllabus that the coursebook follows, each Unit contains the following elements: Lead in, Reading, Reading comprehension, Spotlight on Vocabulary, Spotlight on Grammar, and Spotlight on Skills. Lead in serves to introduce students to the Unit topic, incite discussion and introduce the text of the Unit. Reading consists of an adapted authentic

text on a topic related to students' field of study, comprising texts of different genres (such as a coursebook section, newspaper article, job advertisement, business letter, dialogue, interview, etc.), followed by Reading comprehension made up of exercises which serve the purpose of checking students' understanding of the text. Spotlight on Vocabulary serves to solidify and expand students' knowledge of professional vocabulary and language structures typical for the Unit at hand, while Spotlight on Grammar is focused on the most frequent grammatical units in students' professional discourse. Finally, Spotlight on Skills is focused on language skills most important for future experts in management and organization (such as business correspondence, negotiation, meetings, decision making, etc.).

2.2.3 Final products

The key aim of the coursebooks is to provide comprehensive frameworks for adopting domain-specific vocabulary and underlying grammatical and syntactical structures for effective communication in students' future professional contexts. A comparative overview of the two coursebooks' Unit structure is given in Table 2.

Table 2

Comparative overview of a sample Unit structure

| English for Agriculture and Food Technology | English for Management |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Unit topic• Exercises:<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Reading comprehension- Matching- True-false- Completing the gaps- Writing | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lead in• Reading + Reading comprehension,• Spotlight on Vocabulary• Spotlight on Grammar• Spotlight on Skills |
| Whole unit 4–6 pages | Section 1: 8 pages + Section 2: 4–6 pages |

Another issue which the authors faced during the writing process was the copyright issue. For the English for Agriculture and Food Technology Students coursebook, most texts selected as the core of the unit are under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, and the author was granted permission by the European Commission and AGRIVI for a smaller portion of texts. Authors of the Management coursebook mostly used texts attributed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License or adapted texts by various authors, duly acknowledging the sources. Images used were primarily from Pixabay and Unsplash and required no attribution; one author granted copyright permission for his artwork.

2.3 After writing

Once the arduous work of materials writing was completed, the texts had to go through the design and editing phase. In the case of the Agriculture and Food Technology coursebook, the author worked with a language editor to ensure that the texts were clear and coherent. Once the editing phase was completed, the designer made sure that each Unit followed a simple but clean outline. The authors of the Management coursebook worked with a designer to

make the materials more visually appealing to students since the course content required more visual prompts and stimuli (e.g. numerous charts, brand logos, reports sample emails, etc.). The process included several iterations of the materials going back and forth between the authors and the designer. However, this process was not without its challenges, since these iterations led to a number of omissions and misunderstandings which required additional time to amend.

3 Discussion

Even though the work on materials research, writing and editing took around a year and a half in both cases, the period in question was much longer. The underlying knowledge and beliefs of authors, the teaching experience, the testing of materials with students, etc. had been forming for years beforehand.

Coursebooks have been met with approval from the students and colleagues alike and authors were satisfied with the result, but there is always room for further improvement and fine tuning in several aspects. A well-designed coursebook material should be clear, relevant, diverse, interactive, adaptable, accessible, and engaging. Although being tailor-made, coursebooks designed for Agriculture and Food Technology, as well as Management students might not always align perfectly with their specific needs. Firstly, the trial semester of using the coursebooks has shown that they require a better balance to the course content since in-class use has shown that units contain elements which are beyond students' current content knowledge making it more difficult for a percentage of students to have as much use from the course as intended by the authors. This fine tuning would further lead to final tests being better adapted to students' language proficiency. Secondly and consequently, this adjustment to the difficulty and complexity of the materials needs to be done based on continuous student feedback. The authors have agreed that annual needs analysis should yield sufficient information to this end. Information to be garnered from students should include how much the material has helped them prepare for the final exam, which parts require further expansion, and whether they feel anything is missing. The end goal which the authors had in mind when working on the coursebooks was primarily to help students succeed in passing their exam, but also to add value to their future professions by equipping them with useful knowledge.

Additionally, coursebooks may become quickly outdated, especially in rapidly evolving fields, rendering the content irrelevant or obsolete. ESP coursebooks might emphasize technical terminology at the expense of practical communication skills, which are vital in professional settings. To address these challenges, improvements can be made by incorporating more interactive and dynamic learning materials, integrating multimedia resources, and fostering real-life communication scenarios through role-plays or case studies. Furthermore, regular collaboration with subject teachers can ensure that the course content remains current and pertinent to the learners' specific fields, enhancing the overall effectiveness of ESP education.

4 Conclusion

This brief account summarizes the experience of two sets of authors in writing coursebooks in their respective fields of expertise – English for Agriculture and Food Technology, and

Management. For the sake of clarity and simplicity, the process was described in terms of three stages – before, during, and after materials writing. Key takeaways from the whole process of writing the coursebooks indicate that the efforts were well worth undertaking, primarily because students responded positively to the materials at hand and expressed usefulness of the ESP materials in their professional development. Additionally, main pitfalls have been identified along with means of amending them.

Ultimately, the development and utilization of tailor-made coursebooks in higher education institutions may represent a vital step towards improving language learning outcomes and ensuring academic success for students. By customizing the content to meet the specific needs and goals of learners, teachers can create a dynamic and engaging learning environment that fosters language proficiency and subject-specific expertise simultaneously. These materials not only cater to the unique demands of various disciplines but might also empower students to confidently navigate their academic and professional journeys. Embracing the concept of tailor-made ESP teaching materials may suggest at least a small commitment to personalized education, which can in turn equip students with the language skills and knowledge essential for their future careers.

References

Basturkmen, H. (2010). *Developing Courses in English for Specific Purposes*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Basturkmen, H., & Bocanegra-Valle, A. (2018). Materials design processes, beliefs and practices of experienced ESP teachers in university settings in Spain. In Y. Kirkgoz & K. Dikilitas (Eds.), *Key Issues in English for Specific Purposes in Higher Education* (pp. 13–28). Springer.

Bielousova, R. (2017). Developing materials for English for Specific Purposes online course within the blended learning concept. *TEM Journal*, 6(3), 637–642. <https://doi.org/10.18421/TEM63-28>

Brown, D. (2006). *The Elements of Language Curriculum: a Systematic Approach to Program Development*. Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.

Garcia Laborda, J. (2011). Revisiting materials for teaching languages for specific purposes. *3L: Language, Linguistics, Literature*, 17(1), 102–112.

Hutchinson, T., & Waters, A. (1987). *English for Specific Purposes: A Learning-centered Approach*. Cambridge University Press.

Jolly, D., & Bolitho, R. (2011). A framework for materials writing. In B. Tomlinson (Ed.), *Materials Development in Language Teaching* (pp. 107–134). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781139042789.007>

Richards, J. C. (2001). *Curriculum Development in Language Teaching*. Cambridge University Press.

Salazar, E.U. (2017). Designing and implementing an ESP course: revisiting an experience. *Pensamiento actual*, 17(28), 197–207.

Srinivas, M. (2021). Designing customized ESP materials: principles, procedure, and practice, *FORTELL*, 42, 62–73.

Izvleček

Razvijanje učnih gradiv v visokem šolstvu – študiji primerov pri predmetu angleščina kot strokovni jezik

Komercialna učna gradiva za poučevanje strokovnih jezikov so običajno namenjena potrebam širokega kroga študentov, tudi kadar gre za ožje strokovno področje. Zato so za razvijanje gradiv za bolj specializirana področja potrebni dodatni čas, sredstva in napor. V prispevku sta predstavljeni dve študiji primerov razvijanja učnih gradiv za poučevanje angleščine kot strokovnega jezika na dveh srbskih visokošolskih ustanovah: za kmetijstvo in živilsko tehnologijo ter menedžment. Rezultat je bila izdelava dveh učbenikov, razvitih posebej za dodiplomske in magistrske študente angleščine v kmetijstvu in živilski tehnologiji ter za dodiplomske študente angleščine za menedžment. Primerjava in analiza obeh učbenikov vključuje različne vidike kot so: utemeljitev in učni načrti predmetov (npr. učni izidi, cilji in naloge, vstopne ravni študentov, vrste okvirja učnega načrta itd.), število učiteljev, vključenih v proces razvijanja učnih gradiv, pristopi k analizi potreb, izbira in zaporedje vsebin, avtorska in druga vprašanja, teoretični in metodološki okvirji, časovnica in posamezni koraki v procesu ter končni izdelek. Kljub različnim ciljnim skupinam, učnim vsebinam in ciljem ter ustaljenim okvirjem je postopek pisanja v obeh primerih potekal podobno, podobne pa so tudi omejitve in možnosti za razvoj. Ključno pa je predvsem to, da je razvijanje gradiv za specializirana področja zahtevno in časovno obsežno delo.

Ključne besede: angleščina kot jezik stroke, razvijanje učnih gradiv, izdelava učbenika, učna gradiva