

CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION IN TEACHING ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES

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Abstract

Teachers of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) face a range of challenges in today's educational landscape. Unlike general English classes, teaching ESP requires in-depth knowledge of the target field—be it business, medicine, law, or, as it is the case in this paper, food technology, which many language teachers may not possess. This can lead to gaps between what students need and what teachers can effectively provide. A primary challenge lies in adapting language instructions to align with the distinct professional or academic requirements of learners.

Another challenge is keeping up with the rapidly evolving terminology and practices in various industries. For example, new technologies and global trends frequently change the language used in technical or professional contexts, requiring teachers to update their materials and knowledge continuously. The issue of designing materials for English for Specific Purposes in the field of Food Technology is still relatively unexplored. Often, there is a lack of quality ESP resources, making it necessary for teachers to create customised materials, which is an effort that demands time, expertise, and institutional support.

Moreover, ESP learners often have high expectations. They may need to achieve functional fluency in a short time, which puts pressure on teachers to deliver highly focused and results-driven lessons. Assessing progress can also be tricky, as standardised tests often do not align well with specialised language goals.

Keywords: *challenges in ESP teaching, learners' expectations, designing materials, specialized language goals*

1. INTRODUCTION

Teaching English for Specific Purpose (ESP) in tertiary education is challenging, not only for students, but also for teachers who must possess both knowledge of a foreign language and expertise in the specific subject they are teaching. This dual requirement puts them in a difficult position as it demands a comprehensive understanding of the particular field they are teaching. In an era of rapid changes in both science and professional fields, the knowledge and focus of language instructors must extend far beyond purely linguistic content (Mikulec Rogić, Cibulka & Rujevčan 2022). Furthermore, being a successful and effective ESP teacher often involves conducting research to understand the discourse of the texts that students use, as well as collaborating with subject specialists (Johns & Dudley-Evans 1991). In our case, this means working closely with other teachers within our academic community who teach subjects relevant to students' future careers. Above all, it is of utmost importance to understand students' points of interest, which requires conducting a detailed needs analysis, as described in detail by Hutckinskon & Waters (1987). The main point made by the authors is that the focus should be put on “what the students need to do in order to learn”. The same authors also suggest a framework for analysing students' needs, which consists of several questions: Why are the learners taking the course? How do the learners learn? What is their learning background? What sources are available? Who are the learners? According to Robinson (1991, p. 3), a needs analysis “aims to specify as closely as possible what exactly it is that students have to do through the medium of English”. Consequently, language teachers must tailor their lessons to resonate with students, considering their background, interests, expectations and knowledge level. We followed the same approach. Since we teach English in the field of food technology, it was important to understand our students' wishes and expectations to adapt course materials accordingly. The results of our study are explained in the next part of this paper. Furthermore,

the analysis of students' needs and expectations led to the publication of three textbooks, which are now used in our English classes. This highlights the importance of establishing strong interaction between students and teachers, with the teacher taking the role of a language advisor to students who already possess knowledge in their professional domain. As we argue in the next section, ESP teachers take on multiple roles: they are course designers, material providers, researchers, collaborators and evaluators (Dudley-Evans & St. John 1998).

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1. Materials

In our study, a questionnaire was administered to 54 students regarding the most effective methods of ESP teaching as well as the innovative and creative approaches employed by teachers during lessons. The survey also aimed to determine whether ESP teachers actively promote and encourage the development of critical thinking among students and whether students perceive this as important.

The questionnaire included 54 students in total: 37 first-year graduate students enrolled in the Food Engineering, Process Engineering, and Nutrition programmes at the Faculty of Food Technology Osijek, and 17 first-year undergraduate chemistry students from the Department of Chemistry. All participants began learning English in the first grade of primary school or earlier and have been studying English for at least 12 years.

2.2. Methods

Once the questionnaire results were collected, a qualitative analysis of the answers was conducted. The questionnaire was administered during regular class sessions, with students receiving printed copies of the questions and providing written responses. For some questions, students could choose more than one option; therefore, the total number of responses exceeded the number of participants. As a result, the data are presented in percentages.

3. RESULTS

The analysis of the student survey yielded findings regarding perceptions and preferences related to methods of teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP), with particular emphasis on creativity, innovation, and the development of critical thinking skills in the classroom (Table 1).

The results showed that a significant proportion of students (61 %) consider traditional teaching methods, specifically lectures and practical exercises, as the most effective approach to learning English for Specific Purposes. This finding is somewhat unexpected, especially in light of the growing integration of technology in education. Multimedia resources (e.g., videos, podcasts, and interactive platforms) were identified as effective by 37 % of respondents, while 26 % preferred interactive group activities and discussions. Only a minority (6 %) regarded group presentations as the most beneficial learning method.

Regarding the importance of creativity and innovation in language teaching, 94 % of students acknowledged such approaches as important to varying degrees. Specifically, 37 % of students rated them as “very important,” 20 % as “extremely important,” and another 37 % as “important.” Only 6 % considered them of little importance, and none viewed them as unimportant. These results suggest that although students generally consider traditional methods to be more effective, they still place a high value on teaching strategies that go beyond strictly conventional formats.

When evaluating specific creative teaching methods, the use of quizzes and games (e.g., language quizzes and linguistic games) emerged as the most highly valued approach, with 69 % of students identifying them as effective. Multimedia tools were the second most preferred option, selected by 59 % of students. Role-playing and debate were chosen by 22 %, while only 11% of students considered group presentations to be highly effective. These findings imply that students are more engaged by dynamic, game-based activities than by more passive or presentation-oriented methods.

When asked how they most effectively practice English for Specific Purposes, the highest percentage of students (57 %) indicated a preference for using interactive online platforms. Nonetheless, traditional dialogic exercises with professors remain widely used, with 44 % citing them as effective. Fewer students reported practising through peer conversations (15 %) or language exchanges with native speakers (6 %). This dual reliance on both digital and traditional methods suggests a transitional pedagogical environment in which conventional and modern practices coexist.

Students also reported frequent use of media in their language learning activities. Specifically, 62 % stated that they use media either “often” or “very often,” with an average of 8 hours per week devoted to media-based learning. A smaller proportion reported using media “sometimes” (15 %) or “occasionally” (19 %), and only 4 % indicated rare or no use of such resources. These findings suggest that media may support student autonomy and engagement in language learning.

The majority of respondents placed significant importance on the development of critical thinking in the language learning process. Specifically, 46 % of students rated it as “very important,” and 11 % as “extremely important.” An additional 35 % considered it “moderately important,” while smaller percentages rated it as “somewhat important” (7 %) or “not important” (2 %). These results indicate a broad awareness among students of the value of higher-order thinking in ESP education.

Regarding the degree to which students perceived their language teachers as promoting critical thinking, 52 % indicated that such encouragement occurred frequently. A further 33 % stated it happened “occasionally,” while 6% believed it occurred consistently across all lessons. Only 7 % stated that professors do not foster critical thinking, and 2 % were unsure. This suggests that although most instructors are perceived as actively supporting critical engagement, there is still room for a more systematic integration of these pedagogical goals.

Question	Provided answers	Number of answers	Percentage
1. Which method of ESP teaching do you find the most effective?	Traditional teaching methods – lectures and practice	33	61 %
	Interactive group activities and discussion	14	26 %
	Use of multimedia (videos, podcasts, online platforms)	20	37 %
	Group presentations	3	6 %
2. In your opinion, how important are creative and innovative approaches in language learning?	Unimportant	0	0 %
	Not so important	3	6 %
	Important	20	37 %
	Very important	20	37 %
	Extremely important	11	20 %
3. Which language teaching methods do you consider the most creative?	Use of multimedia resources	32	59 %
	Use of quizzes in language teaching	37	69 %
	Group presentations	6	11 %
	Debate/role-play	12	22 %

4. What is the most effective way you practice ESP?	Through traditional dialogue exercises with professors	24	44 %
	Peer conversations	8	15 %
	Using online interactive platforms	31	57 %
	Language exchanges with native speakers	3	6 %
5. How often do you use media (videos, audio recordings, images, etc.) in your language learning process?	Rarely or never	2	4 %
	Sometimes	8	15 %
	Occasionally	10	19 %
	Often	17	31 %
	Very often	17	31 %
6. How do you assess the importance of developing critical thinking in the language learning process?	Not important	1	2 %
	Somewhat important	4	7 %
	Moderately important	19	35 %
	Very important	25	46 %
	Extremely important	6	11 %
7. Do the language professors at your faculty encourage the development of critical thinking?	No	4	7 %
	Sometimes	18	33 %
	Often	28	52 %
	Always/During every lecture	3	6 %
	I don't know	1	2 %

Table 1. Questionnaire results

4. DISCUSSION

Adapting language and style to the audience, in this case, food technology students, is crucial for effective communication. Language teachers need to design their lessons taking into account students' backgrounds, interests, expectations and knowledge levels.

Furthermore, adjusting the tone, vocabulary, and formality plays an important role as well. Through this ongoing process, teachers have to stay flexible and responsive. On the other hand, there are numerous consequences if language teachers do not tailor the language; students may become confused, bored, or disinterested if the language is too complex or simplistic for their level of understanding. The purpose of the instructions may not be effectively achieved if the language and style do not match the intended goal (information sharing, entertainment). The students' knowledge level on the topic determines the depth and complexity of the information presented. Teachers should assess by conducting a needs analysis whether the audience consists of experts, novices, or a mix and adjust their explanations and terminology to ensure understanding. There are numerous instances of student groups characterised by heterogeneity.

On the one hand, some students are advanced in mastering foreign languages, and they appreciate technical jargon and in-depth analysis, whereas some students may require more basic explanations and analogies to grasp complex concepts.

Furthermore, vocabulary and terminology choice should match the students' level of understanding. While technical terminology is often suitable when addressing a specialised audience within the field of food technology, it is important to avoid or clearly explain such jargon when communicating with individuals outside the discipline. To enhance understanding, complex concepts should be conveyed using simpler and more accessible language. Relating these ideas to familiar, real-world examples—such as comparing the process of fermentation to everyday food preparation—can help clarify abstract topics. Additionally, ESP teachers should define key terms and abbreviations that may not be widely recognised by students, especially for students from different academic backgrounds or specialisations.

Furthermore, the way English is taught today has been significantly influenced by artificial intelligence (AI). AI tools, which have become widely available in recent years, have transformed instructional methods and classroom dynamics. These technologies provide tailored learning experiences by adjusting to each student's abilities and learning pace. AI-powered tools—like language apps and conversational bots—encourage interactive learning and help users build vocabulary, improve grammar, and enhance speaking skills. Writing tools and grammar checkers powered by AI offer instant feedback, guiding students to refine their writing and learn from their errors. Overall, incorporating AI into English education can help support an engaging and inclusive learning environment that prepares learners for changing communication demands.

In the context of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), AI has proven especially valuable by enabling highly customised instruction aligned with learners' professional or academic needs. For instance, AI systems can generate industry-specific vocabulary practice, simulate real-world communication scenarios, and provide targeted feedback based on the learner's field, such as business, healthcare, engineering or food technology. This ensures that ESP learners gain not just general language competence, but also the specialised language skills needed for success in their specific domains.

On the other hand, all these new learning tools might increase teachers' workload. First of all, teachers need to invest time in understanding how to use AI tools effectively and stay up-to-date with rapidly evolving technology. Then, incorporating AI means redesigning lesson plans, assessments, and activities to integrate new digital components. Finally, monitoring students' use of these tools can be time-consuming. Teachers may need to spend more time supervising how students interact with AI tools to ensure appropriate and ethical use (Reinders 2024). In summary, with AI, language teachers do not necessarily have to work more, but they do have to work differently. The role of the teacher is evolving—from being the sole source of knowledge to becoming a facilitator, tech-integrator, and guide in a more personalised, AI-enhanced learning environment. Consequently, the role of teachers is extremely important as they need to be technically literate. However, the survey suggests that many students still prefer traditional teaching methods, so these approaches should not be overlooked. This could be explained by the fact that some students prefer to be passive listeners rather than active class participants, likely because they lack strong English-speaking skills. We can assume that they find participation in quizzes more dynamic and engaging, as it encourages competitiveness. However, it is also possible that they expect some kind of reward for their effort.

And finally, ESP teachers have to deal with another challenge. These are materials for ESP, which are very limited. ESP teachers often take on the role of gathering and designing their teaching materials. While some coursebooks do exist, particularly for more widely taught subjects like Business English or general technical English, ESP learners frequently have highly diverse and specialised needs.

The problem also applies to English in food technology, which comprises scientific fields of chemistry, ecology, nutrition, sustainability, etc. In this situation, teachers must participate regularly in compiling teaching materials, because in many cases it is impossible to find suitable teaching materials. For highly specific English courses, like the one in food technology, suitable textbooks are unavailable, which leaves teachers responsible for developing an entire curriculum. In such situations, especially when the

teacher lacks expertise in the subject matter, the wealth of freely accessible online resources becomes especially valuable.

In general, many questions address the development of teaching materials.

What are the possible difficulties teachers face when compiling materials?

To what extent are teachers of ESP able to create their teaching materials?

Can teachers be authentic when creating teaching materials?

The questions regarding the creation and use of teaching materials for ESP in food technology have been relatively little researched. The first stumbling block is selecting suitable teaching materials that are quality-checked at the same time. The truth of scientific facts changes daily. Many new scientific discoveries lead to changes in the understanding of science. Therefore, teachers of ESP cannot use outdated materials but must create new ones. Homemade materials must be usable for a certain period and can by no means be just recycled. Teachers of ESP create new materials or modify homemade teaching materials daily. When creating teaching materials, they struggle with numerous scientific texts and research papers that they must process and, in most cases, simplify for teaching. Choosing topics that meet the needs of students of ESP, in our case, topics from food technology, remains an absolute priority. These do-it-yourself teaching materials should be a reliable source of authentic materials. However, the exact meaning of authenticity is not clear. Many equate this term with the term genuine or unsimplified, while others claim that the genuineness of the text does not guarantee relevance and that the text is only truly authentic if it is exploited in ways that reflect real-world use (Dudley-Evans & St. John 1998). According to Richards 2001b), authentic materials are used to create an indispensable communication context in the classroom and to stimulate as much as possible the communication observable in the real world outside. Additionally, the content of these teaching materials may require frequent updates, as scientific knowledge develops. For instance, scientific literature in the area of nutrition, which is a part of food technology, evolves rapidly, sometimes even on a daily basis. Therefore, when developing teaching materials, educators must pay great attention to avoid including outdated or inaccurate information. This process is always complex and, primarily, labour-intensive and time-consuming. Considering the above-mentioned challenges, we addressed them by creating our own materials, resulting in the publication of three textbooks used in our classes for teaching undergraduate and graduate students.

Furthermore, teaching during the coronavirus pandemic led many teachers to enhance their knowledge of digital media in educational settings and become more digitally fit. New digital media (YouTube, chat portals/chat platforms, video conferencing tools, blogs, chat rooms, various free apps for mobile phones) have been used. Digital teaching emphasised the use of quality-checked teaching materials. The need for up to date teaching materials is especially evident online. Outdated materials are unusable, and new ones should be created, meaning that teaching concepts must be more adapted to the digital world in the future. That is the reason why, when designing the curriculum, it is essential to utilise the internet, where both teachers and students can find a wider selection of texts with authentic content. However, today's children are more exposed to films and TV series than to written content, so their exposure to language in informal settings primarily relies on receptive rather than productive language skills (Raonić 2021, p. 23).

Regarding the second question, it can be discussed whether the role of teachers is to find new teaching materials or to create their own (Dudley-Evans & St. John 2009). In case ESP teachers decide to make their teaching materials, their first step is, as already mentioned, to identify the needs of ESP students and then research the market, i.e., identify existing materials. If such materials do not exist, which is usually the case with very specific ESP courses, like food technology, the only option teachers have is to start creating their own materials.

Creating new teaching materials is often impractical and is usually treated as a last resort. Therefore, the instructor's role is to provide students with the necessary materials, rather than developing them from scratch (Dudley-Evans & St. John 2009). After the materials are found and selected, the adaptation process takes place. There is a large number of strategies used in the adaptation process, such as deleting

irrelevant material, simplifying materials or activities, modifying materials or activities to make them either more demanding or more accessible to the learners (Hyland 2006). In our case, when selecting texts, we examined the needs of food technology students. We concluded that reading is the most important skill for our students. Understanding scientific texts is of fundamental importance to them, so we selected and adapted the texts to make them suitable for our students.

Afterwards, ESP teachers must critically review the created materials, both before and after the teaching. Additionally, assessing the effectiveness of the created materials can be challenging. Pre and post evaluation can be challenging for many ESP teachers. The commitment of teachers in this case is very high, and the question remains: Are the teachers who teach ESP qualified for such a job?

5. CONCLUSIONS

In our paper, we focused on students' perceptions of teaching methods and the challenges faced by teachers in ESP instruction. Overall, the survey results indicate a nuanced student perspective that values traditional teaching methods alongside innovative, media-enhanced, and interactive techniques. While students continue to express a strong preference for conventional teaching formats, they also recognise the importance of creativity, media integration, and critical thinking in language education. These findings highlight the need for a balanced pedagogical approach that combines both familiar structures with evolving educational demands. The study also addressed the use of artificial intelligence in teaching and the challenges associated with developing suitable learning materials. The following conclusions were drawn: AI has the potential to support learning and engage the new generation of so-called digital natives (Sadiku, Shadare & Musa 2017) by creating a stimulating and dynamic learning environment. When designing learning materials, it is essential to conduct a needs analysis to help teachers understand students' expectations and preferences in ESP classes. Teachers should also collaborate with subject-specialists, i.e. colleagues from the academic community, to develop materials that align with both the students' needs and the specific professional context, while also considering the heterogeneity of student groups.

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