



AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH TO TEACHING MATERIALS DESIGN FOR PROMOTING AUTHENTIC COMMUNICATION IN UNDERGARDUATE BUSINESS ENGLISH COURSES AT SEEU



Marijana MARJANOVIKJ-APOSTOLOVSKI 

South East European University, Language Center, m.marianovic@seeu.edu.mk

Article history:

Submission 17 November 2023

Revision 19 January 2024

Accepted 01 April 2024

Available online 30 April 2024

Keywords:

Business English,
Materials Design and Selection,
Communication,
SEEU.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.32936/pssj.v8i1.500>

Abstract

Business English coursebooks undoubtedly offer structure and provide the necessary frame for students to rely upon, however, a pitfall to be avoided is blind, uncritical, and unselective overreliance on them. The idea behind this paper is not to entirely banish ESP for Business coursebooks but to supplement them substantially with authentic written, audio and video materials tailored to students' immediate and future needs.

This paper advocates incorporating new approaches and practises in materials design and selection. When intended to be used with inexperienced students, business English teaching materials play a major role in introducing students to the real world of business, in addition to equipping students with the necessary business-related vocabulary and the most frequently used grammar structures. This paper also summarizes the findings of a student survey on the extent to which the business English teaching materials used at SEEU incorporate the essential features of real-world business communication.

1. Introduction

Compared to other fields of English for Specific Purposes, it appears at first glance that teachers of Business English are in a privileged position since the largest number of published ESP coursebooks are intended for teaching and learning Business English. However, in spite of this fact, many Business English students never manage to accomplish the level of communicative competence required for getting and maintaining a working position. This is an alarm which calls for greater attention to be placed on the selection of Business English teaching materials and requires the implementation of alternative approaches to the process of teaching materials selection and design.

What this paper advocates is incorporating new approaches and practises in materials design and selection without entirely banishing ESP for Business coursebooks since they undoubtedly offer structure and provide the necessary frame for students and teachers to rely upon. It warns against blind, uncritical and unselective overreliance on coursebooks which is a common pitfall overlooked by many Business English teachers, who are

sometimes misled by the rich variety of commercially available Business English coursebooks. The paper opens with the definition and main roles of teaching materials, refers to the authenticity of teaching materials based on the audience for which they were intended—as well as the purpose for which they were originally created—and summarizes the findings from a student survey on the extent to which the business English teaching materials used at SEEU incorporate the essential features of real-world business communication.

2. Definition and Roles of Business English Teaching Materials

The most frequent association for the term “language teaching materials” is a book due to the fact that such is the experience of the majority. However, this paper accepts the wider definition offered by Tomlinson (1998) according to which everything that supports and assists the language learning process can be considered teaching material. In other words, language teaching materials may include everything used for presenting or providing information about the language being taught and/or

learned: a paragraph written on the board by the teacher, newspaper article, video, copied worksheet, workbooks, books, dictionaries, speeches, instructions written on a card, etc. Indeed, everything used purposefully for improving knowledge and enriching the language learning experience may be considered to be language teaching material.

Tomlinson (1998) describes the coursebook as a book constituting the core material for a certain course which aims to provide as much as possible and is designed to serve as the single book that the students need. The coursebook usually includes grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, functions and language skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking. On the other hand, supplementary materials are “materials designed to be used as supplement to the basic course material. They are related to developing the reading, writing, listening and speaking skills and are not related to learning the language elements” (Tomlinson, 1998)

When dealing with inexperienced students, apart from equipping them with the necessary business-related vocabulary and most frequently used grammar structures, one of the major roles of teaching materials is to introduce students to the real world of business communication, and to create a safe environment for practice which would enable students to say: “a-ha, been there, done that!”

There has been an ongoing discussion and a persistent dilemma regarding the use of a coursebook. Opinions are divided between those who consider books an instrument of control, which destroys both teachers' and students' creativity; and the other half, who claim that books are welcome since they have been professionally developed and tested which, consequently, results in a direct relation to the syllabi. This enables teachers to devote more of their time to assisting and facilitating the learning process, or even to focus on their personal professional development, instead of wasting valuable time on designing their own teaching materials. There seems to be a third group, whose attitudes lie somewhere in between the above-mentioned polarized extremes, which believes that although a coursebook is a necessity, it should not be forgotten that many printed books are of poor quality since they do not reflect the generally accepted facts about foreign language learning and fail to meet students' real needs.

One of the many issues related to the use of a single course book is that it may deprive both the teacher and the students of the possibility to develop creativity, to take initiative and to be responsible for the teaching and learning process. Another significant issue is the danger of books following a certain

consistency of the syllabus without taking into consideration the dynamics and interactive nature of the language learning process. A third relevant remark regarding coursebooks is their inability to meet all individual student needs and to provide enough material to meet most of the students' needs, and to enable teachers to use materials flexibly in order to individualize the learning and teaching process. An additional insecurity with reference to coursebooks is whether they present the language realistically and naturally. Moreover, students may easily get bored by the coursebook's predictable form and contents. On top of that, coursebooks become obsolete very soon after publication and more often than not include culturally inappropriate contents or assumptions about the language learning process which do not always overlap with the teachers' and/or students' ideas about the most effective language learning strategies.

A serious remark proposed by opponents of the idea of using published teaching materials is that these works continually diminish the importance of the teachers' role in the process of developing courses and designing syllabi. Due to this very fact, Masuhara (2010) refers to teachers as the ‘endangered species’. Key phases in the process of course design are taken away from the teachers and are entrusted to the designers of teaching materials. The relevant literature on course design suggests that teaching materials design or selection is a later phase of the process. The entire process should be initiated by a needs analysis, followed by setting objectives, then designing syllabi, and then deciding on the most appropriate teaching methodology and teaching materials. The whole process should be rounded off by testing and evaluation. The specific teaching context and students' needs should create the general framework for setting the objectives: and only then should the decision regarding teaching methodology and materials be made. However, in most cases all this remains only as a theoretical model while in reality the stages of course design are different. Most often, in the initial stage teachers and administrators create a very broad framework containing the characteristics of the students' preferences and proficiency level determined on the basis of a test at the beginning of the teaching/learning process. In stage two of the course design process, teachers select the most appropriate coursebook from the offer available on the market for the given course and the specific group of students defined in stage one. All the phases which (according to the theoretical model) should precede the moment of selecting teaching materials (needs analysis, setting objectives, designing a syllabus, deciding on the most appropriate teaching methodology) are considered finished in the initial phase. Nowadays, in most teaching contexts the coursebook is chosen out of a limited number of available, previously designed materials based on a roughly determined proficiency level as well as on roughly specified objectives. In fact, the teachers who select

teaching materials are informed by book authors and publishers about the students the materials are intended for, the objectives set to be accomplished, as well as the most appropriate teaching methodology. All these aspects are contained on the book cover and introduction. Most coursebooks also include a syllabus map of how to integrate the units into a coherent whole. In such a line-up of the course design process, the book authors and publishers take direct control, and the degree of their dominance depends on whether teachers decide to strictly follow the coursebook, or to use it more flexibly, often by taking their own initiative.

Littlejohn (1992) (in Tomlinson, 1998) is one of the researchers worried by the danger of coursebooks diminishing and weakening the role of teachers and thereby causing greater dependence. He points out that the detailed instructions given by teaching materials reduce the teachers' role to one of a manager who only oversees the implementation of a pre-planned event during the actual teaching process in the classroom.

Wala (2003), from the point of view of an editor of commercially published coursebooks, observes that: "just as the language does not exist from itself and for itself – we do not speak just so as to say something but to communicate a certain meaning – the same is the case with the coursebook – it does not exist for its own sake. The coursebook fulfils a certain need and goal, serves a certain function, and conveys meaning." (Wala, 2003, p.60). She expands on Halliday's claim that "language is as it is because of what it needs to do" in order to understand coursebooks: they too, or indeed any other form of teaching material, are as they are because of what they need to do. Using inadequate linguistic resources—or other forms of resources—results in a communication breakdown. Similarly, in order for the coursebook to fulfil its function and to transfer knowledge, adequate and appropriate resources are necessary. When evaluating a coursebook, the key question is "what should this coursebook do?" Just like language itself, coursebooks do not exist in a vacuum. On the contrary, they exist with a certain goal and are shaped by the objective itself set in the specific context. Edge and Wharton (in Tomlinson, 1998) are two of the many authors from the field of teaching and learning English who caution against polarized attitudes regarding coursebooks, and who express concern that the structure of the coursebooks leads to greater dependence of the teacher, especially by controlling the decision-making process, and thus minimising the teacher's role in the teaching process. They also suggest that published teaching materials can have a positive effect on teachers' professional development. They claim that the participants in social interactions want and need structure as safe ground and a safe platform for negotiation and research. Structure becomes a useful tool for managing lectures, which frees teachers from routine

tasks and enables them to focus on effective planning and utilising their creative skills. Different attitudes related to the influence of coursebooks lead to various suggestions regarding the role coursebooks could play. Edge and Wharton are convinced that carefully designed coursebooks can contribute to teachers' professional development and can encourage the development of decision-making skills and right pedagogic reasoning.

As a viable solution to the dilemma of whether to use a coursebook or not, Edge and Wharton (in Tomlinson, 1998) suggest reviewing teaching materials as discourse. This may be done, for instance, by creating an activity which requires students to work together and then to analyse the language needed for completing the task. The author suggests that what is useful and helpful in the process of language learning is the primary focus on meaning and not form. Teachers and students using a coursebook that presents tasks in this manner are at liberty to decide if the activities are going to be completed as suggested or will radically change their course. Whatever they decide to do is a response to the suggestions given by the author of the coursebook and their decision and attitude towards the book should be shared with others. This is a direct contribution to the overall opinion which should eventually reach the author and publisher and thereby influence future publications. In this way coursebooks become a separate genre whose aim is a constant dialogue in which principles and suggestions applicable in day-to-day teaching practice are shared.

Published coursebooks have a number of advantages and are popular for a number of reasons. Their merits are clear: they save the teacher valuable time and unnecessary work, and they provide a working framework which is of great importance for teachers with modest working experience, or those who are pressed for time at their disposal. Moreover, printed coursebooks make a lot of pedagogical decisions, such as the contents of the course and the most appropriate teaching methodology for it; they also appear professional, which is of great importance for business English students. Many of the coursebooks are part of a package which includes a detailed teacher's book, resources and additional materials for students, self-study materials, audio and video resources, etc.

Ur (2012) points out that she personally chooses to use a coursebook since it helps her regulate and pace the program while, at the same time, creating a solid base for personally selected supplementary teaching materials. Apart from teachers, the students also benefit from using a coursebook. Students learning from a collection of materials originating from various sources frequently point out that they lack perspective of the goal

set to be achieved. A number of research findings suggest that in general students who do not have a coursebook view the course as less serious. To these students, having a coursebook to learn from is a matter of prestige.

Ruby (2003) is another author who comments upon these contrasting views. Ruby examines claims that coursebooks are unable to provide the exact texts and activities which are most needed in a certain context—noting their limiting effect on the teachers' creativity and liberty to determine the actions—all the way to claims that a coursebook offers a collection of professionally designed materials which enable teachers to spend their scarce time on facilitating the language learning process. With reference to the latter claims, she highlights the following advantages of using a coursebook:

- Meeting a number of practical needs in contexts where English is not the first language;
- Enabling an overview of material covered and material to be covered next;
- Creating safe grounds for negotiations and research based on structure and transparency;
- Enabling teachers to focus more on lesson planning, adapting and supplementing teaching materials;
- Providing inexperienced teachers with security and building their self-confidence;
- Offering sophisticated design, content and organization, which is often impossible to achieve when creating one's own teaching materials;
- Introducing innovative ideas which assist not only teachers but also students alike to grow and develop in their roles.

Ruby (2003) remarks that the usefulness of coursebooks is limited and, thus, they can be good servants but bad masters. She sums up the key issues of the relationship between teaching materials and the teaching process itself as follows:

- ensuring that coursebooks do not negatively influence creativity by taking the investment and responsibility away from teachers and students which turns out to be one of the basic and most important pedagogical principles;
- ensuring that the dynamic and interactive nature of the language learning process is reflected in the coursebook and the consistency of the syllabus is preserved;
- ensuring that the majority of students' needs are met most of the time, while flexibility and individuality on the part of the teacher is secured;

- ensuring that samples of natural usage of the language in everyday life are also included apart from samples of its conventional use;
- ensuring that the materials are dynamic in nature and not entirely predictable in form and content.

Based on the literature reviewed, when deciding whether to use a single coursebook, a collection of materials from a variety of sources, or a balanced combination of both, the following advantages and disadvantages of coursebooks should be taken into account.

The main advantages of using a single coursebook could be summed up as:

- *Framework* – the coursebook offers a clear framework enabling the teacher and students to know what follows next, which creates a strong feeling of structure and progress;
- *Curriculum* – the coursebook can serve as a syllabus which, if followed systematically, encompasses the planned language items to be learned and taught;
- *Ready* -made texts and tasks– the coursebook offers ready-made texts and tasks appropriate for the students' proficiency level, which saves the teacher a lot of time;
- *Instructions* – the coursebook provides clear instructions and support for inexperienced teachers who still do not have confidence in their own teaching skills and abilities;
- *Autonomy* – the book can be used for students to learn new material, to review what has been covered, as well as to follow the individual progress of each student. A student without a coursebook is automatically more dependent on the teacher.

The main drawbacks of using a coursebook for teaching and learning language would be:

- *Inadequacy*—a single coursebook cannot meet the needs of a different group of students exposed to various learning situations;
- *Irrelevance and/or Lack of interest* the topics included in the book can be irrelevant and not interesting for the students. They can also be obsolete. Since teachers know their students and their students' needs best, they can always make the right choice of relevant topics;

- *Cultural inappropriateness* – the coursebook can include inappropriate content which would make the students feel uneasy or even insulted;
- *Limited proficiency levels* – in most cases the coursebook targets students at a certain proficiency level without taking into consideration the facts that groups usually consist of students at different levels of proficiency and mixed abilities;
- *Possible negative effects on the teaching process* – in a case of blind and uncritical use of the coursebook, teachers miss the opportunity to take the initiative and teach according to their personal teaching philosophy.

3. Authentic Business English Teaching Materials

“Authentic, original, real, natural or unsimplified are some of the most frequently used adjectives in the realm of English for Specific Purposes to refer to texts or materials that can be used in language learning/teaching context but have been specifically written or developed for public not consisting entirely of language students.” (Bocanegra-Valle, 2010, p.145)

“Authentic material would be any kind of material taken from the real world and not created specifically for teaching and learning a language. It could be text, visual or audio contents; realia such as tickets, menus, maps, schedules, products, equipment, models. Some authors claim that the minute an authentic material is in any way altered (for instance by cutting, selecting, simplifying, transferring from one communication medium to another), it automatically stops being authentic. However, the application of any of these strategies is justified if done to suit and meet students’ needs.” (Ellis and Johnson, 1994)

When discussing the authenticity of ESP teaching materials, Bocanegra-Valle (2010) refers to Henry Widdowson (1998) who claimed that authenticity lies in the purpose the teaching materials were originally created for, their appropriateness for the audience they are intended for, the interaction with the audience they provide, the aims they are set to achieve and their efficiency: and not in their physical origin only. In other words, what the speakers of the language find real or authentic, might not be considered authentic by the students learning the language.

Harding (2007) is yet another author who offers useful advice regarding the use of authentic materials in the context of ESP and suggests:

- using context, texts and situations from the specific area which, regardless of whether realistic or

- simulated, shall include language the students are bound to need in their future careers;
- exploiting authentic materials from students’ field of specialty or profession, although at first glance they may not appear to contain “normal English”;
- engaging students in authentic tasks, or more precisely asking the students to do what they would really do with the authentic materials at their job post (Harding, 2007).

Frendo (2005) identifies authenticity (i.e. whether the language in the coursebook comes from the real world or it has been purposefully generated and/or adapted and intended for teaching and learning language) as the key factor in the process of selecting an English for Specific Purposes coursebook. Teachers’ opinions about which option is better are divided. Many ESP teachers consider the use of inauthentic or artificially created texts focused on certain lexes or forms useful since they make the teaching process effective and efficient. Authenticity also refers to the activities, i.e. their resemblance to the real professional world.

Many activities in ESP lectures include negotiations and presentations. The question which is imposed is how the teacher should evaluate the students in dealing with an authentic task or, more precisely, what the main criteria should be: accomplishing the business aim and placing language second or putting the focus on the vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation?

4. Business English in the Context of South East European University (SEEU)

Business English 1 and 2 courses at SEEU are offered to second-year undergraduate students from the Faculty of Business and Economics who have reached at least intermediate level of general English. Led by the belief that teaching materials should provide an interaction identical to the one students would experience at work, these courses include:

- Simulations of informative and persuasive presentations with follow-up discussions;
- Mock job interviews;
- Case studies (analysing, discussing and proposing possible solutions);
- Reading and discussing authentic business related articles;
- Listening to and discussing business news coverage on current world issues;
- Online discussion forums based on real TED talks covering business related topics;
- Role plays and simulations of meetings in which students negotiate, ask for clarification,

- agree/disagree, persuade, and introduce themselves and the companies they work for;
- Small talk and socialising.

These elements are an integral part of the learning and assessment process of the BE courses offered at SEEU simply because the teaching materials should enable students to develop, and then to transfer the skills acquired from the classroom to the working environment and say, “OK, I’ve been there & I’ve done that! I know what is expected from me!”

The teaching materials used for Business English courses at SEEU consist of a combination of the second edition of the coursebook *Buisness Result upper-intermediate* (Duckworth, Hughes & Turner, 2018) and *Skills for Business Studies upper-intermediate* (Rogers, 2018) by Oxford University Press. These two volumes are supplemented by a selection of additional materials from a variety of sources.

4.1. Student Survey

In order to survey the students’ opinions about the extent to which the BE teaching materials used at South East European University (SEEU) incorporate the essential features of the real-world business communication, a small-scale research was conducted.

The participants in this research were 21 undergraduate, full-time students attending Business English 1 and 2 courses in the academic year 2022/2023. A concise questionnaire consisting of 7 questions was used as the main data collecting instrument. The survey was administrated at the end of the semester so students were able to give informed answers. Question 1 asked students to state their preference regarding the teaching materials i.e. using a single coursebook, a selection of materials from a variety of sources, or a combination of both, on a five-degree Likert scale. Question 2 asked students to select the features of business communication they find most useful based on their own experience. Question 3 asked students to identify the activities done in class which bear most resemblance to the communication acts the students were involved in when doing their internship or at work. Question 4 asked students to decide on the extent to which the Business English teaching materials incorporate the features of real-world business communication, again based on their previous professional experience as interns or employees. Question 5 was an open-ended question asking students for their preference regarding the areas of business communication in which they need more practice. Questions 6 and 7 asked students to provide details about their professional working or internship experience. The complete questionnaire used as the main data collection instrument is included in the Appendix of this paper.

4.2. Results and Findings

The survey revealed that 61.9% of the students interviewed prefer using a single coursebook for learning Business English: 33.3% completely agree, whereas 28.6% somewhat agree with the idea of a single book being used.

An equal percentage of students (23.8%) “completely” and “somewhat” opted for the idea of using a collection of materials for the Business English courses.

28.6% of the respondents “completely” and 33.3% “somewhat” agreed with the idea of using a combination of a coursebook and supplementary materials from various sources.

All of the interviewees expressed an interest in being included in the process of selecting supplementary teaching materials intended for use along with the coursebook. On the other hand, a considerable number of students, more precisely 38.1%, considered choosing the teaching materials to be entirely the teacher’s obligation. This is most likely due to the fact that the students have no prior experience of being consulted regarding the teaching materials.

42.9% of the students interviewed considered that job hunting skills, presenting, introducing themselves and the company for which they work, small talk and socializing were all activities which include real world communication elements.

Over half of the respondents, more precisely 52.4%, considered that simulations of informative presentations (with follow-up discussions), video lessons including interviews with real business people, and case studies were the class activities which bear the closest resemblance to real business environments the students have encountered as part of their professional or internship experience.

66.7% of the students believe that the business English teaching materials used at South East European University incorporate enough essential features of real world business communication.

Some of the comments given regarding the expectations, needs and requirements from the teaching materials used for the BE courses were:

“we have sufficient materials and exercises to successfully learn the necessary material”; “the book includes all we need to know and have for the future to be like entrepreneurs or something related to business world and personally I don’t think that something should be changed”; “the materials are related with the topics in focus and we discuss them in detail”; “everything in

the book, teaching and learning material is enough for us”; “it’s enough and its great what we use for learning”.

In terms of their needs, students suggested having:

“more presentations, debates and video lessons because they are more effective and interesting” and “maybe more about job skills”; “conversations about successful businesses and successful people, since this will be more attractive and more motivating for students”.

As far as their expectations are concerned, some students expected to improve their grammar and vocabulary.

Students’ answers indicate that students are satisfied with the materials used and recognize their relevance to the main field of study. This is a notable finding, when taking into consideration the fact that all the activities suggested have already been included in the course.

The answers provided for the last two questions focused on students’ personal experience, and they indicate that students are able to provide knowledgeable answers rooted in their personal working experience. A considerably high number of students stated having personal working experience, 71.4% from internship and 69.1% from being employed, mainly in family-owned businesses.

What came as a surprising fact is the considerable number of respondents who reported being involved in written communication, when the prior assumption was that the main emphasis should be placed on spoken communication. As a result, in the future more attention should be given to written English, based of course on a more detailed insight into the type of written communication to which students are, or will be, exposed.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

It is a well-known fact by now that the need to communicate lies at the very heart of the language learning process. The classroom should be a safe environment for students to experiment and practise, however the final goal is to enable students to transfer what they have learned to the real world. Therefore, in the case of Business English courses, the classroom should possess the features of the real business world.

Parallel to the different learning styles, there are also various teaching styles which the teaching materials should support, particularly by offering directions for a variety of options in which the materials could be used. Alternative approaches and practices in materials design and selection are a must: although there are high-quality teaching materials on the market, many

students fail to reach a satisfactory level of communication competence in the course of their university studies. It would be worth remembering that the largest number of published English for Specific Purposes coursebooks are intended for teaching and learning Business English (for more details see: Bocanegra-Valle, 2010). Yet hardly any coursebook can satisfy all the students’ needs all the time, consequently most of the coursebooks require at least occasional supplementing in order to adapt them for the specific needs of a certain group of students.

It should not be forgotten that coursebooks are nothing but tools which gain their real significance through the teacher and students. If used appropriately, the coursebooks can increase individuality and positively engage the creativity of teachers and students. Limited and narrow-minded use of coursebooks, particularly resulting from lack of preparation time as well as requirements from authorities, interferes with individuality and kills creativity. The whole idea of the flexible use of coursebooks seems to be far more feasible in courses for specific purposes, where BE belongs rather than in General English courses.

The surprising and unexpected discovery regarding the extent to which students are or were involved in written communication implies the necessity of a greater emphasis to be placed on developing students’ written communication in Business English. The decision about what to include should be based on students’ needs analysis, as well as upon in-depth interviews with focus groups consisting of businesspeople from the companies in which SEEU students do their internship. This type of research seems to be a natural continuation of the research done for the purpose of writing this paper. The findings of such research would help determine the aspects of written communication that need to be included in syllabi for Business English courses at South East European University.

An immediate recommendation stems directly from the small-scale research conducted at SEEU: that written communication should no longer be neglected and deserves identical attention as developing students’ speaking skills.

In summary, the whole idea behind the Alternative Approaches to Business English Teaching Materials Design is not to banish coursebooks entirely, but to find the most appropriate balance between using one of the many commercially available Business English coursebooks and supplementing it with authentic materials from a variety of sources in order to ensure exposing students to the type of communication they will face in the real world. This real-world proximity will increase their chances of employment, of retaining their posts, and of prospering in the business world.

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