Current issues in ESP materials

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Abstract

Materials for ESP reflect the specific language needs that are being addressed and have much in common with "general" ESL/EFL materials, but there are important distinctions as well. Like the field of ESL/EFL in general, ESP has evolved considerably over the past 50 years, and the impact of this evolution can be seen in the area of materials development. While much has been written on ESL materials development, discussion focusing on the issues involved in the development and use of materials in ESP contexts has been less robust. This paper first provides an overview of language learning materials in general. Particular features and challenges with ESP materials are then discussed, looking specifically at the role of needs assessment and the questions about the level of specificity required in ESP materials. The paper concludes with suggestions for 'best practices' in identifying and preparing ESP materials.

Keywords: materials development, authenticity, specificity, critical ESP

1. Introduction

Coffey (1985) noted that "The main consideration in ESP exercise typology must be that of authenticity. All ESP work is in essence a simulation of a real-life task" (p. 84). Simulating real-life tasks in a way that is meaningful and beneficial to ESP students is fraught with challenges. However, simply providing them with examples of real-life tasks and texts is insufficient, as ESP students by definition do not have the language skills, the appropriate cultural knowledge, and (often) the expertise (academic, professional, or occupational) necessary to do the tasks or understand the texts. As Widdowson (1997) has observed, what is important is not whether a particular