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ABSTRACT Strategies for designing and teaching graduate-level courses in English for special purposes (ESP) to Thai students are outlined, based on a course taught in one institution. An approach that integrates language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) and stresses communicative competence is recommended, with English used as the medium of instruction. Acquisition is to be included, but primarily as support for the learning of communicative skills. Evaluation is to be based on communicative effectiveness rather than grammatical and structural accuracy. Options for task-based activities are discussed briefly, and the use of a final oral presentation, with subsequent class discussion, is described. A discussion of instructional materials looks at the advantages and disadvantages of materials produced in-house, the issue of authentic materials, and concerns in text selection. Contains 18 references. (MSE)

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# FROM NEEDS TO GOALS: ESP MATERIALS WRITING FOR THAI POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS

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ED 424 761

To identify the stakeholders' changing needs and goals, to determine their influence on course design, as well as to explore both the situational and pedagogical contexts of language use at the graduate level, a research study was conducted at the five faculties dealing with science and engineering subjects.

The result of the study indicated a disparity between the university's stated policy and its implementation at ground level. It also revealed a disagreement between respondents in their perceived needs and wants. In addition, individual students differed as to their personal aims, which were based on their current language proficiency, their language difficulties, and their expectations with regard to the learning of English.

This paper focuses on the writing of ESP materials, which takes account of these diverse perspectives of needs and goals, local context, as well as global concerns. It is drawn from theoretical insights and practical experience, covering topics such as bases for syllabus design and the approach adopted, linguistic content, and learning tasks and activities. It also deals with advantages and disadvantages of in-house materials, and provides practical advice for material production. An example of the materials produced will be demonstrated during the presentation. It is expected that this sharing of knowledge and experience will make a significant contribution towards meeting the challenges of ESP today and tomorrow.

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## **I. DESIGNING G.E. 092-520 (Consolidating Skills for Science and Engineering Graduates)**

In designing an ESP course, many practitioners have opted for a range of approaches within a course, exploiting one type of syllabus as the organising principle, and the others as complementary components. As a result of the target and present needs analysis carried out earlier (Tubtimtong 1994 and 1996) and a review of previous literature on syllabus design (Stern 1984, Munby 1984, Yalden 1984, Kraknke 1987, Widdowson 1990 and Robinson 1991), it was decided to choose a **skill-centred** approach as the base for G.E. 092-520. The main aim of this approach is to help the learners to develop skills and strategies which will continue to grow after the ESP course itself, and to help them become better processors and producers of information.

Skill-based instruction is most appropriate when learners need specific skills (as illustrated in the needs of graduate students), and especially when these skills are well-defined. The syllabus may focus exclusively or principally on one of the four traditional language skills. The framework for G.E. 092-520 is based on an integrated skills approach, the principles and practices of which will be the next topic of discussion.

### **1.1 An Integrated Skills Approach**

The results of target needs analysis indicate that the administrators and the specialist staff prefer an ESP course which emphasises the development of reading and writing skills. The students, on the other hand, express the desire to most improve listening, speaking and writing skills. Reading is still considered to be important, but long years of training at secondary and tertiary levels, together with schematic knowledge of the subject matter, enable them to tackle rather successfully the *conceptual* and *communicative* intents of texts. Does this mean that reading should left out? Is there any inter-relationship between *receptive* and *productive* activities or between reading and writing, listening and speaking? According to Professor Widdowson, all linguistic behaviour is related to the underlying activity of interpreting. Even though a particular exercise may focus on a particular skill or ability, its effectiveness will often require the learner to make reference to other aspects of his communicative competence. He explained that

*The approach ... should avoid treating the different skills and abilities that constitute*

*competence in isolation from each other, as ends in themselves. What the learner needs to know how to do is to compose in the act of writing, comprehend in the act of reading, and to learn techniques of reading by writing and techniques of writing by reading. If the aim of language learning is to develop the underlying interpreting ability, then it would seem reasonable to adopt an integrated approach to achieve it.*  
(Widdowson, 1978: 144)

In designing the course for postgraduate students, an integrated approach was adopted on the grounds that reading activities provide inputs for writing tasks, opportunities for exploring discourse structure of the target communication (thereby equipping the learners with the model for both constructing and assessing their own writing) and they also stimulate and extend the interpretative ability (which the learners bring to bear when they read) to the usable skill of writing. In this approach, reading and writing, as well as listening and speaking, can thus be viewed as two sides of a coin, the activities of the one complementing the activities of the other in the interactive and negotiative process of communication.

With an awareness that the students need to improve their productive abilities, English is thus used as a medium of instruction to provide linguistic and conceptual inputs for developing the receptive skill and stimulating response in the target language. When the students occasionally face difficulty in understanding, the mother tongue can be exploited to summarise and clarify certain points. This advantage of the mother tongue cannot be overlooked at the initial stage. But when the students feel competent in understanding and negotiating their way in English, the mother tongue should be phased out to enable the students to really function, to operate, in the target language.

To achieve this goal of being a competent user of the language, the student should be given every opportunity to practise the four skills in a real communicative context and in an integrated framework. Examples of the combinations of various skills include writing down brief notes while listening to a speech, giving verbal reports as well as making them in writing, and summarising the gist of what is read. The four skills can even be combined in task-based activities which are built on appropriate topics and situations. The information gained from reading and listening can be used for discussion and report writing. This promotion of practice and use in an integrated framework serves, according to Professor Strevens,

two particular ends, "they assist the learner to make the leap from *receptive* to *productive* learning, and they enable him to gradually improve the accuracy, fluency and quality of his command of English." (Strevens 1988: 11)

## **1.2 Linguistic Content**

The majority of students' linguistic competence does not reach the level at which they can express their ideas coherently or communicate information successfully. Does this mean that students need more knowledge of linguistic rules? Does the teaching and learning of the grammar of English (at this level) help improve communication skills? From personal experience the answer is "NO". University-level students have been taught linguistic rules for nearly twenty years (and some are heartily sick of learning these rules year after year). Yet they cannot transfer this knowledge to the actual business of communication. The majority of students have acquired the rules of grammar and could do well in a test which is designed to assess this knowledge objectively, such as TOEFL Part II (a test of STRUCTURE). What they lack is the ability to transfer these grammatical rules to the creation of coherent passages of discourse, and the opportunity to practise and produce language in a meaningful context, which in this case is their specialised field of study.

The course to be designed thus aims to promote the active use of language, to encourage the students to participate, and to give them confidence and a feel for the communicative value of language. With guidance and illustrative models in the target language (communicative conventions; the organisation and discourse structure of scientific genre), together with the provision of the opportunity for extending their linguistic competence and intellectual ability, it is expected that the students will gradually improve their productive skills.

The shift of focus to communicative properties and productive activities is not intended to downgrade the teaching and learning of grammar. In a situation where English is a subject, and not a medium, the knowledge of linguistic rules is always significant. But we see that the acquisition of linguistic rules does not automatically result in the development of productive skills, and the repetition of remedial teaching of grammar at the postgraduate level often causes frustration and rejection by the students. Grammar, though important, must therefore be given a subsidiary role and only the features which are important for the development of communicative acts or which are linked to the rhetorical patterns of scientific conventions will be focused on. For example, the use of defining

relative clauses in a formal definition or passive voice in a process description should probably be included.

Since the focus is on communication, and not on linguistic forms, criteria for assessing the students' performance in some of the oral and written tasks must be based on communicative effectiveness rather than grammatical and structural accuracy. The guideline used is the same as that adopted in the work at Ngee Ann Polytechnic, which states that "... unless the grammatical deviations are of such a nature or on such a scale as to interfere with the main message of the communication, the criteria for judging spoken and written discourse must be the appropriacy and acceptability of language used rather than grammatical flawlessness or accuracy. The concept of 'tolerance level' is applicable to judging grammatical accuracy in communication."(Tan, C. et al 1988: 132)

The operational concept of 'tolerance level' is adopted in order to encourage the students' participation and the generation of discourse, and to remove the burden of a high proficiency level of linguistic competence and to allow the students to concentrate on conceptual and communicative aspects of language. Grammatical problems which may result from these productive and interactive activities, and which may impair the transfer of information or distort the gist of discourse, will be tackled as they arise. In the future, attempts will also be made to identify the areas of grammatical structures which cause continuing 'trouble spots', and the students will be directed to repair these weaknesses in the 'Self-Access Learning Centre' (which has recently been opened at CULI). This arrangement is expected to solve, to a certain extent, the problem of limitation of allotted time for teaching and learning.

### **1.3 Learning Tasks And Activities**

As previously mentioned (in section 1), the four language skills can be combined in task-based activities which are built on appropriate topics and situations. The last unit of G.E. 092-520, for example, is an *oral presentation* of a topic selected from the students' specialised subjects, an integrated skills and tasks focus. The students research and prepare the text (to suit the audience, their classmates, who come from various departments) in advance, read from notes, and respond to their classmates' questions or requests for further information. The audience takes notes of the presentation, discuss interesting or debatable points which might arise, and, subsequently, give an assessment of the presenter's performance.

The communicative and interactive exchange at the end of each presentation is a challenging task for all participants due to

its impromptu nature. Both the presenter and the audience have to draw on and employ all the language they have, which will extend far beyond what they have been taught in this course alone. Although the linguistic level of some of the students may not be a great deal higher than when they first entered the course, they learn to use their English and have more confidence in expressing themselves in the target language.

In addition to language skills, an oral presentation involves 'professional skills' or 'communication skills', of which the micro-skills include control of gesture and body language, effective use of visual aids, as well as appropriate terminology and clear pronunciation. The students' oral presentation is also video-recorded for subsequent teacher's feedback on their performance, while peer evaluation is used to enhance participation and the sense of responsibility for the learning process.

In designing learning tasks and activities for ESP, there is a wide range of options, from carrying out a series of operations, role plays and simulations, case studies, and project work. At this advanced level, tasks should allow for flexible approaches and different routes, media, modes of participation and procedures. They should also allow for different solutions depending on the skills and strategies drawn on by the learners. Candlin (1987) suggests that good tasks should draw objectives from the communicative needs of learners; promote attention to meaning, purpose and negotiation; encourage attention to relevant data and involve learner contributions, attitudes and affects. In addition, tasks should ensure cost-effectiveness and a high return on investment, i.e. the effort to master given aspects of the language should be functionally useful, either for communicating beyond the classroom, or in terms of the cognitive and affective development of the learner. (See detailed discussion of pedagogic criteria for task-selection in Candlin, op. cit.)

One type of tasks which encourages the cognitive and affective development of advanced learners is tasks concerned with *problem-solving* activities. Such tasks require the students to activate high-order thinking skills and schematic knowledge, providing motivation for the use of language and a base for contribution from all participants, who in the case of G.E. 092-520 do not share the same background or specialism. However, it has been recognised that an advantage of having students from various disciplines in the same class is that one can look at the problems (of common interest) from various perspectives, creating an opportunity for each student to express his/her knowledge of the subject and at the same time contribute to the solution of the problem. Such topics as food irradiation, computer simulation in industry, waste management, the search for alternative sources of energy and information technology, can be used to provide a meeting ground, a source of interesting and thought-provoking materials for advanced learners. The cross-disciplinary discussion and problem-solving mirror real life activities and also help to foster solidarity and cooperation among members of the group. The tasks thus satisfy both the demand for individual relevance and the need for wider communication -- with those who share, as well as with those who do not share, the same assumptions and experiences embedded in the specialist discipline.

The final step in this lengthy process of syllabus design, after such factors as language skills, linguistic content, learning tasks and activities have been determined, is the preparation and writing-up of a course description and unit plans. Those for G.E. 092-520 are presented at the end of the paper.

## **II. MATERIALS PRODUCTION**

In Thai universities, the majority of ESP courses use locally-produced or in-house teaching materials rather than published textbooks. The rationale behind this practice lies in the fact that materials writing contributes to academic promotion and to the status of both the ESP practitioner and the institution. The universities with strong and experienced ESP staff produce their own materials, based on needs analysis, sound theoretical principles and university language policy. Those with few ESP staff adapt globally available materials to suit their specific situations.

### **2.1 Advantages And Disadvantages of In-house Materials**

In evaluating materials for ESP courses, Pilbeam (1987) suggests that in-house materials are likely to be more specific and appropriate than published materials, and to have greater face validity in terms of the language dealt with and the context in which it is presented. In addition, in-house materials may be more flexible than published textbooks (an advantage on a short course). Finally, the writers of in-house materials can make sure that the methodology is suitable for the intended learners.

The disadvantages are that it requires an investment of time, experience and expertise, as well as a financial cost to write tailor-made materials. If these resources are insufficient, the materials may not be able to reach their expected standard or to achieve their intended outcome. The result is that hastily written materials "based on highly relevant spoken and written texts" have "rather uninspired exploitation." (Pilbeam: *ibid*, 122)

As an alternative to hastily written materials and uninspired activities and tasks, generally available textbooks should be considered. The exploitation will yield more fruitful results if there is provision for change and choice built into the materials. Teachers can make various judgements with regard to learner readiness for that form of input, the method to be chosen or the approach to be adopted. In circumstances where teachers have heavy teaching loads, and are less confident or experienced, the availability of such textbooks is a great help. Their exploitation can also serve as a preparation for or as part of an education process, illustrating ideas and techniques which may later be employed in writing their own materials when the teachers become more professionally qualified.

In consequence, the boundary between in-house and published materials is not clear-cut. The former can also become the latter. Many well-known universities and institutions in the ASEAN region have produced materials with the objective not only of catering for their own students, but also of having the materials published. These educational establishments, with an existing large student population, provide the best testing ground for assessing the effectiveness of tailor-made and locally produced materials. Examples of in-house-turn-published materials include textbooks from the University of Malaya Spoken English Project, SEAMEO RELC 'English for Study Purposes', and, more recently, 'Teaching of English in Meeting the Needs of English and Technology'. The teaching materials for G.E. 092-520, although in their developmental stage, are expected to be published at a later date.

## **2.2 Authentic Inputs As Teaching Materials**

The first step in the writing of ESP materials is the selection of text, i.e. language data, which will be exploited in the teaching and learning process. Selective samples can be collected as part of the needs analysis stage of course design. Alternatively, it may follow the needs analysis stage as in the case of G.E. 092-520. Since the programme is offered to science and engineering students, it would seem reasonable to make the selection with reference to the types of text that the learners will be expected to deal with at the end of the course i.e. scientific and technological textbooks, research articles, lecture handouts and laboratory reports. The crucial problem concerns how far a materials writer should use subject-specific authentic input as ESP language teaching material.

One group of scholars in the field express the view that selection according to scientific subject matter will not automatically yield the kind of discourse that is appropriate to learners' needs. In other words, authenticity does not lie in the materials themselves, but is created by the reader/hearer's response to the text. Widdowson, an advocate of this view, explains that, "Authenticity depends on a congruence of the language producer's intentions and language receiver's interpretation, this congruence being effected through a shared knowledge of conventions." (Widdowson, 1979: 166) The language teacher's task is to help the students develop an awareness of these conventions. The conclusion which Widdowson draws is that students should not be confronted with 'authentic materials' until they have sufficient awareness of those conventions to be able to react to them authentically.

Based on this methodological perspective, Widdowson (ibid: 190) proposes a choice between simple and simplified accounts, the former being preferred. *Simple accounts* are specially written for students, taking into consideration the students' linguistic level, highlighting any rhetorical conventions that the students need to learn, and avoiding any idiosyncrasy of style. *Simplified accounts*, on the other hand, are 'doctored' versions of original texts. Widdowson illustrates the use of simple accounts in the writing of ESP materials published under the 'focus series' of Allen and Widdowson (1974).

The use of both simple and simplified accounts, i.e. created texts, has been criticised by proponents of authentic texts. Bhatia, in a recent article (1994: 51), states that "in either case the authenticity of the original *genre* which the text represents is compromised. Whether it is a simplified version or a simple account, the resulting discourse is less likely to be a genuine instance of the *genre* which the original text represents, if it does at all. This certainly changes the authentic nature of the *genre*."

Bhatia advocates an adoption of a generic perspective in ESP, i.e. the use of authentic discipline-specific texts as input to designing teaching materials and, more importantly, the need to maintain 'generic integrity' in the ESP classroom.

The generic perspective, or the use of authentic texts, currently underlies the theoretical base for the selection and preparation of ESP materials, especially at an advanced level. This approach, however, cannot be implemented when the students in a class do not share subject specialism, as in the case of G.E. 092-520. The students come from various departments and work in highly specialised areas. Hence, it is difficult to find content which is sharply-enough focused for all members of the class. It becomes necessary to use source materials which are not specially written for specialist readers, but which are intended for a broader audience. Such materials can be found in the *New Scientist*, a popular science magazine which reports on new scientific discoveries and technological advances, and which also discusses issues of current concern. The advantage of using this type of material is that it *complements* rather than *replicates* (which may not be what the learners at this advanced level want from an English course anyway) the students' specialised subjects, extending the frontier of their schematic knowledge. The materials are genuine instances of discourse, and not created texts. But, as Bhatia has pointed out, they may not necessarily represent the same genre as the original, i.e. they are not authentic scientific research reports. They represent two different genres and serve two very different communicative purposes. However, if the original, presumably published in learned journals, were to be accepted as teaching materials, the majority of students (excluding those who are in that particular field) as well as the language teacher would not be able to cope. Hence, in an inter-disciplinary class, authentic discipline-specific texts have to be sacrificed. The materials writer may have to look for authenticity in other aspects of the course -- in learners' response, in the interpretative strategies they bring to bear on communicative exchange, and in the types of tasks and activities that take place in the learning situation.

After the process of text selection, the next steps involve the production of isolated units, the trial of isolated units, and the production of a pilot course. The pilot course will undergo further modification in the light of acceptable suggestions from teachers and students, and finally become in-house materials or published texts.

### **2.3 Practical Advice**

Materials production, especially ESP, is a time-consuming and difficult enterprise. It is an art, as well as a science, in its own right. It has been accepted that not every language teacher can be a good materials writer. Many have tried and failed. In addition to being equipped with sound theoretical knowledge of language description and methodology, a good materials writer should possess one crucial quality, i.e. the ability to see the *potentiality* of text. This is because the same text can be approached or interpreted differently by various writers. However, only under experienced and creative hands can the salient features, in terms of grammatical, functional and conceptual components, be expertly exploited, and can interesting and stimulating activities and tasks be generated.

For less qualified writers, a few pieces of practical advice from seasoned practitioners would be of great help. These include the following procedural guides:

1. At the planning stage, the writer should study available ESP texts on the market and identify which goals, tasks, classroom structural arrangement, and unit/textbook format are usable and which are not. The examination and evaluation of these available texts will broaden the novice writer's perception and bring a professional touch to his own design approach.
2. It is advantageous to work out a realistic time frame for design, development and dissemination. Materials writing is a time-consuming process and it usually takes longer than anticipated.
3. The writer should build up a collection of reading and supplementary materials. More than one example of the required topic should be assembled. This provides a variety of choice, and the remaining extracts can be employed as exercises or tests.
4. The use of multi-media input, i.e. such visual and mechanical aids as tapes, video and computers, enhances the learning process, allowing for diversity of tasks and activities.
5. It is necessary to develop a unit format before beginning to write. But the writer should avoid the assembly line approach which makes each unit look the same -- with the same type of text,

the same kind of illustrations, the same type and number of exercises. If it does not send the writer to sleep writing them, it will certainly send the learners to sleep using them (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987: 107).

6. As a procedural guide for assessing activities created in the materials for each unit, Moore (1977: 49) offers the following criteria:

<b>Purpose</b>	Is the purpose clearly defined?
<b>Type</b>	Does the exercise type effectively and economically accomplish the purposes?
<b>Content</b>	1. Is the ratio of language given/ student task economic? 2. Are instructions to students clear?
<b>Interest</b>	Is it interesting?
<b>Authenticity</b>	Is it a meaningful task?
<b>Difficulty</b>	Is it challenging? Does it contain distracting difficulties?

7. The materials may have to undergo several revisions and modifications before they reach the final stage of publication. Hence, Moore (ibid: 43) once stated that two essential tools in materials production are an efficient eraser and a large waste paper basket.
8. Large scale projects should be based on team planning and teacher evaluation at every stage of the materials production. This helps to eliminate some of the hit-and-miss situations which sometimes arise.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Writing and producing materials will equip the writer with valuable skills in materials development and help increase his professional competence. It provides a venue for a teacher to exploit his adopted linguistic theory, methodological insights and creative ability rather than depending on textbook writers. Hence, it is both a challenge and an opportunity. As for a local writer, his best asset lies in his understanding of the target and learning needs of the students, and the knowledge of the socio-cultural-economic context to which they belong and which shapes their goals and expectations. With patience, perseverance and (most importantly) perspiration, he will be able to produce the kind of materials which serve both the short-term and long-term goals of his students and have a broader socio-economic impact as well.

**CONSOLIDATING SKILLS  
FOR SCIENCE AND ENGINEERING GRADUATES  
(G.E. 092-520)**

**COURSE DESCRIPTION**

This course is designed for science and engineering students who have a fairly good command of English.

The aim is to develop in students an ability to handle the kind of written English that they will be concerned with as an integral part of their specialist subject.

The approach is based on the belief that learning a language is not merely a matter of learning sentence patterns and vocabulary but must also involve an understanding of how people use these linguistic forms to communicate. The course is thus structured in such a way that students will be aware of the way English is used in written communication, thereby helping them develop techniques of reading and providing them with a guide for their own writing. The skills of listening and speaking are, from the beginning, integrated into each lesson and subsequently form a major component of the course, preparing students for taking part in academic discussion and presentation.

An important feature of the course is that it is not designed to teach the subject-matter, but to develop in students an understanding of how their specialist subject is expressed through English. The students are encouraged to exploit their background knowledge to gain new information. The course thus combines the use of language and subject-matter in a meaningful context.

**OBJECTIVES**

It is hoped that by the end of the course students will be able to:

1. read, interpret and analyse their scientific and technical material efficiently;
2. write a summary of what is read;
3. express ideas and views through argumentative discourse;
4. understand statements and short lectures in English;
5. give a short presentation on scientific and technical matters in English.

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## **COURSE ORGANISATION**

This course consists of 10 units as follows:

### **First Half**

- Unit I: Exploring Text Structures
- Unit II: Establishing Textual Cohesion
- Unit III: Vocabulary Building
- Unit IV: Interpreting and Constructing Precise Statements
- Unit V: Summary Writing

### **Second Half**

- Unit VI: Processing and Producing Complex Structures
- Unit VII: Discovering Communicative Functions
- Unit VIII: Developing Basic Types and Patterns of Arguments
- Unit IX: Listening and Note-Taking
- Unit X: Oral Presentation

## **EVALUATION CRITERIA**

Mid-Term (Units I-V)	30%
Final (Units VI-X)	30%
Classwork	30%
Attendance	<u>10%</u>
	<u>100%</u>

Scores of 60% and above will be considered satisfactory (S)



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