

TEACHING OBJECTIVES AND SELECTION OF MATERIALS

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In this article we aim to look at one of the constant challenges facing teachers of Languages for Specific Purposes (LSP): selecting the most suitable material(s) that will help them, as well as their students, to meet the objectives set by the course. By definition, the effectiveness and suitability of a product – an LSP teaching material, in our case - is possible only by relating it to the use it is put to, and by evaluating to what extent it meets the teacher's and the learners' respective needs. Hence, evaluating the material will be soundly carried out by relating it to the teaching purposes it is supposed to serve.

There are two main strands of constraints on teaching. One of them is outlined by the curriculum. The other, by the learners' educational needs. Thus the basis of choosing teaching materials is how well the reaching of these objectives is served by the material.

The curriculum will function as a map of the learners' needs from a general perspective. It will include a list of general objectives referring to the development of communication and language skills enabling the prototypical learner to progress towards effective communication, along with a set of contexts that would develop awareness of and sensitivity to cultural difference. The communicative situations and the order to present them is chosen according to how the learner is supposed to need them.

Learner-centred teaching on the other hand aims to help individual, specific learners reach a level of autonomy that enables them to use the language in real-life situations outside the classroom. Unlike the curriculum, which is designed by considering a prototypical learner, the needs of the actual learners in the classroom, and therefore the specific objectives of

the course, can only be mapped out by needs analysis. It is this dual constraint that sometimes accounts for the dilemma in hand: out of a range of teaching materials designed by considering a common curriculum, which is more effective?

After considering the needs analysis, there may be a few components of a material that should be evaluated in order to decide whether it can be used to address the specific needs that have been identified, as well as to reach the more general curriculum objectives. Here are a number of issues that the teacher should consider:

◆ *Does the material serve the needs of the learners?*
This refers to the extent to which the material addresses the specific objectives of the course, which may mean a focus on one or a particular set of skills, a choice of language items or of topics that would be relevant for the learner, etc.

◆ *Does the material develop learner autonomy?*
It is the very essence of learner-centred teaching, as mentioned above, to ensure that the learners are given plenty of opportunities to develop skills and strategies that they can apply autonomously outside the classroom and without assistance from a teacher.

◆ *Does the material offer training in authentic language use?*

One major objective of any language course is the development of the students' communicative competence. In this respect, authentic materials are necessary to serve as a model for production and a basis for developing reading and listening comprehension. Given the learners' need both to become fluent and aware of language use, it is essential

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that the teaching materials provide learners with balanced opportunities both for precise language use and for enhancing fluency in real-life situations. Another important component might be, in this respect, the development of vocabulary hand in hand with repair strategies for situations when the speaker does not find the necessary resources. Different language skills could be trained both separately and integrated, as real life often requires.

◆ *Does the material relate to the learners' experiences?*

This not only ensures the relevance of the language points studied and of the contexts that activate them, but also acts as an important motivator.

◆ *Does the material offer opportunity for reflection on and improving individual learning styles?*

Awareness of learning styles and patterns also relates to attaining the important objective of developing learner autonomy mentioned above, as it will help learners to continue their learning after the end of the course. Secondly, it helps focus on the factors motivating students to continue their learning.

◆ *Is the material motivating for the learners?*

This comes as an all-embracing question, having to do with virtually every element mentioned before: the relevance to learners' own experience, to their individual learning style, to their specific communicative needs etc. but also to their need to see they have made progress. To keep track of their progress they can work through quizzes, for example, on the topics dealt with recently, or use checklists. Progress made is probably the best motivator, but beyond its psychological value, it is a methodologically essential ingredient of a teaching material when it comes to recycling and consolidation.

To conclude, when selecting a material we need to match it to the objectives of the course not just in a wide and non-specified sense, but very specifically, by looking at our students' actual needs for learning the language. We need to remember that a teaching material becomes a learning material. That is why when we use it we must start asking ourselves questions as to its validity to the persons who are to make use of it. Learning is what teaching is all about in the end.

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