



**UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA**

**AN EVALUATION OF COURSE MATERIALS IN THE TEACHING  
OF ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES - A CASE STUDY  
AT UNIVERSITI PERTANIAN MALAYSIA**

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AT UNIVERSITI PERTANIAN MALAYSIA

by

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ABSTRACT

An abstract of the thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Pertanian Malaysia in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Science.

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Supervisor : Dr. Abdul Rahman Md. Aroff  
Co-Supervisor : Encik Yahya Hj. Baba  
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This study is an attempt to obtain feedback in the form of opinions from the teachers and students of the BB251 course on the effectiveness of the course materials. Attitudinal information from students' was also obtained as it is felt that this would help towards understanding the teaching/learning situation.





A Teachers' Questionnaire and a Students' Questionnaire were administered after the course materials had been used. The study revealed that of the 88 respondents, 92 percent of the students found the course useful. The majority of them felt that the course had helped them read references and textbooks in English while about 50 percent indicated that the course had helped them write in English.

The students assessed exercises on vocabulary, structure, comprehension, and writing according to three criteria: interest, usefulness and difficulty. Exercises that demanded manipulative skills were assessed as interesting and not difficult. Exercises that demanded productive skills were assessed as difficult and correspondingly interest level in these exercises fell. Exercises which use non-linear aids were assessed as difficult but interest level tended to be higher than in similar exercises where graphic cues were not used.

The teachers stated that the objectives of developing reading skills could be achieved though some of the objectives of developing writing skills were difficult to achieve. The teachers assessed manipulative exercises as not difficult and not interesting while exercises that demanded productive skills were assessed as interesting and not difficult.

The findings of this study show the need for a Teachers' Guideline on the use of the course materials and also for supplementary materials. It recommends that the BB 251 course materials concentrate on developing reading skills only and that the use of Bahasa Malaysia should be further studied.



## ABSTRACT

Abstract tesis yang dikemukakan untuk memenuhi sebahagian dari syarat-syarat untuk keperluan Ijazah Master Sains di Fakulti Pengajian Pendidikan, Universiti Pertanian Malaysia.

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Kajian ini adalah satu percubaan untuk mendapatkan maklumbalik dalam bentuk pendapat-pendapat guru-guru dan pelajar-pelajar dari kursus BB 251 mengenai keberkesanan bahan-bahan kursus BB 251. Maklumat mengenai sikap pelajar-pelajar juga di ambilkira sebab ianya akan menolong pemahaman situasi pengajaran dan pembelajaran.

Soal selidik bagi guru dan juga pelajar, telah diberikan selepas bahan-bahan kursus itu digunakan.



Kajian ini menunjukkan dari pada 68 responden daripada kalangan pelajar, 92 peratus daripadanya mendapati bahawa kursus BB 251 berguna. Kebanyakan mereka merasa kursus tersebut menolong mereka dalam membaca buku-buku rujukan dan buku-buku teks dalam bahasa Inggeris sementara lebih kurang 50 peratus mengatakan bahawa kursus tersebut menolong mereka menulis dalam bahasa Inggeris.

Pelajar-pelajar menilai latihan-latihan kosa kata, struktur, pemahaman dan penulisan berdasarkan tiga kriteria: minat, kegunaan dan kesukaran. Latihan-latihan yang memerlukan kemahiran manipulatif dinilai sebagai menarik minat dan tidak sukar.

Latihan yang memerlukan kemahiran produktif dinilai sebagai sukar disamping minat terhadap latihan ini menurun. Latihan-latihan yang menggunakan lambang-lambang grafik dinilai sebagai sukar tetapi peringkat minat terhadapnya bertambah tinggi jika dibandingkan dengan latihan-latihan yang serupa yang tidak menggunakan lambang-lambang grafik.

Guru-guru mengatakan bahawa objektif membentuk kemahiran membaca boleh diperolehi walaupun setengah objektif membentuk kemahiran menulis adalah sukar untuk diperolehi. Guru-guru menilai latihan-latihan manipulatif sebagai tidak sukar dan tidak menarik minat manakala latihan-latihan yang memerlukan kemahiran produktif telah dinilai sebagai menarik dan tidak sukar.

Dapatan-dapatan dari kajian ini menunjukkan perlunya suatu Garispanduan Guru mengenai kegunaan bahan-bahan kursus dan juga untuk bahan-bahan tambahan. Ia mengusulkan bahan-bahan kursus BB 251 hendaklah menekankan pembentukan kemahiran-kemahiran membaca sahaja sedangkan kegunaan Bahasa Malaysia dalam bahan-bahan tersebut hendaklah dibuat kajian yang lebih lanjut.

## CHAPTER 1

### 1.0. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

#### 1.1. Introduction

English Language teaching at Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (UPM) has always been a subject of concern to the teaching staff and policy makers. This is reflected in the report based on a survey conducted in November-December, 1977 at the request of the Senate of the University and the Dean of the Faculty of Educational Services. The report, "The Status of English at Universiti Pertanian Malaysia" (J.J. Augustin et al., 1977) highlighted important findings regarding the role of English as viewed by the academic staff and students.

The report revealed that students at UPM needed English for a variety of purposes. Most students said that they needed English for academic purposes. The students considered themselves weak in their spoken English, writing and reading comprehension skills, and wanted courses that would help them in these areas.

The academic staff felt that students were very weak in writing skills but suggested that courses be conducted at improving reading comprehension first; then writing, and other related skills. Lecturers felt that students needed a high



level of reading competence in English because they regarded it as a tool for gaining access to information, especially in science and technology. The academic staff felt that although students may be 'good' at reading comprehension in English they still needed to sharpen their reading skills as it was pointed out that the proficiency in English among the students had deteriorated over the preceding three years (see Augustin et al. 1977:16).

The need to review the existing English language programme is due to the fact that by 1977-78, English had become a second or foreign language. Most students who came from the Malay medium (or national medium) schools had a poor grasp of the English language and yet needed to use it for reading texts in the library. Moreover at UPM, English is considered an academic subject and the grades obtained in English Language courses are taken into account in the overall academic performance of the students.

## 1.2 The Problem

In 1978, a set of materials 'English for Academic Purposes: A six-Unit (36 hour) Course in English Study Skills (reading and writing) intended to assist First Year Students at Universiti Pertanian Malaysia in their private study of English Language Reference Materials' was developed by B. Lee (1978). It was designed for the third level course (code named BB 251) of the English language proficiency programme of the 1979/80 academic session. Between 1979/1982, the materials were used with only slight modifications in exercise types.

There is a need to evaluate course materials of BB 251 because the course materials for BB 251 have been used for some time. Informal attempts at gauging the interest of students regarding the BB 251 course were conducted through question and answer sessions during class. This kind of informal feedback did not give a complete picture of the situation. It was felt that feedback from a well planned study would provide sufficient data for an unbiased assessment of the course materials.

A search through literature revealed that English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course designers have concentrated on materials production. Very little has been done on materials evaluation. As Alderson and Williamson (unpublished manuscript:3) point out :

It is our belief that materials writers, teacher trainers and language teachers should give more consideration to the problem of evaluation. Ad hoc decisions, based on personal prejudice and the vagaries of language teaching and linguistic fashion need urgently to be replaced by decisions based upon research, upon empirical evidence, upon the results of an adequately validated evaluation procedure.

Evaluation of teaching materials can be approached from two fundamental aspects. One is the evaluation of materials for the sake of their subsequent revision and improvement, and the other is the evaluation of student performance as a result of using the materials. For the BB 251 course the need for course materials revision motivated this study of the students' and teachers' responses to the course materials. This evaluation will provide valuable guidelines for the revision and improvement of BB 251 materials.

Thus, in this study, evaluation will focus on the assessing of



students' and teachers' attitudes and opinions towards a set of course materials. The evaluation will not involve assessing student performance as a result of using the course materials as such assessment is a major study in itself.

### 1.3. Aim of the Study

In this study evaluation is seen as a means to systematically collect and analyse information about the BB 251 course materials. The information comes from the teachers and students of the course. Essentially, evaluation is an attempt to obtain feedback from the teachers and students. The feedback in the form of opinions and reactions will help identify and explain the effectiveness (or lack of it) of the course materials.

The main aim of this study is to systematically collect data on the course materials of BB 251 for revision and improvement. The instrument used is the questionnaire directed to the teachers and students of the course. Another important component of the study is to determine the attitudes of the BB 251 students particularly pertaining to the English language. Attitudinal information is quite central to the study as it is felt that the additional data on the students' profile, especially on needs and attitude, will help towards understanding what is happening in the teaching/learning system.

Specifically the study is an attempt :

1. to determine student/teacher opinions of the course materials of BB 251 general and of the types of exercises found in the course in particular.





2. to determine student/teacher opinions of the extent to which course objectives have been achieved through the use of the course materials.
3. to find out students' attitude towards English courses in general and BB 251 in particular. The positive or negative attitude of students towards English language courses will have some effect on their motivation and this in turn will have to be taken into consideration in the subsequent modification and revision of the materials.
4. to obtain critical and professional comments from teachers of the course. Information from the teachers covers mainly linguistic and other valuable suggestions which students may not be competent in offering.

## CHAPTER 2

### 2.0 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

ESP (English for Specific Purposes) is now regarded as an important pedagogical concept among English language teachers. Basically, it means that English is learned for a utilitarian purpose. Mackay and Mountford (1978:2) consider ESP to be defined to a purpose related to 'some occupational requirement ... or vocational training programme ... or some academic or professional study'. The focus on the needs of the language learner implies that English language teaching evolves around adult learners who need English as a means to acquire more knowledge in prescribed disciplines. These learners are probably intermediate learners who need English for study purpose, eg. English for Academic Purpose (EAP) or English for Occupational Purpose (EOP) eg. English for airline pilots.

The definition of ESP and its implications has been well documented. (Robinson 1980, Mackay and Mountford 1978, Munby 1978, Coffey 1980, Selinker, Tarone and Hanzeli 1981). ESP was initially widely interpreted as the teaching of a special language with a statistically quantifiable 'register' which took into account formal linguistic properties, lexical items, collocations, and sentence structures. Lee Kok Cheong (1976) and Macmillan (1976) trace the influence of linguistics on



materials selection in ESP.

Lee Kok Cheng (1976:4) discusses the trends in linguistics study of English for Science and Technology (EST) in four stages: (1) pre-linguistic, traditional attitude to the language of science, (2) linguistic analysis of the lexicon, (3) linguistic analysis of the syntax, and (4) discourse analysis.

Two main approaches to the production of ESP materials have emerged. The first approach is biased towards register analysis. This approach essentially emphasises the study of the verb and/or noun phrase, sentence patterns or sentence connections commonly found in the language of a particular academic discipline. Swales (see Robinson 1980:19) believes that :

"statistical surveys of tense-frequencies, sentence-types, vocabulary, etc. provide a framework (in new EAP subject areas) within which pedagogical selection can be made, even if the principles of such selection are only partly based on the frequency information".

Thus, researchers such as Salager (1977:90) find the quantitative analysis approach to the study of English technical literature (Engineering) a useful framework for the "optimum comprehension training of non-English speaking scientists".

The second approach is advocated by H.G. Widdowson who questions the value of characterising scientific and technical English as a register or group of registers defined in terms of formal properties for teaching. He suggests that the approach in language teaching should focus on the communicative functions of language. Trimble (see Robinson 1980:21) suggests that a

stretch of language should be viewed as a unique piece of communication (discourse). He, for example, distinguishes the physical paragraph from the conceptual paragraph (which may be made up of several physical paragraphs), and he deems the conceptual paragraph to be the 'basic unit'.

The influences of these two approaches have stimulated vast development in the field of ESP teaching especially in the production of new and interesting materials.

One of the most useful components of the claimed virtues of the ESP approach is the focus it places on needs analysis. Studies on needs analysis of learners and the translation of these needs into a course has become the focus of research in recent years. One of the most comprehensive theoretical study of needs analysis is Richterich and Chanceral's (1978) Study on 'Identifying the needs of adults learning a foreign language'. An important and useful aspect of this work is the comprehensive list of different sources of information for a needs analysis. These range from surveys, questionnaires and interviews, etc. Richterich and Chanceral, however, did not confine themselves specifically to ESP.

Munby (1978) definitely focusses on developing a sociolinguistic model for defining the content of purpose - specific language programmes. Munby's theoretical model builds up a profile of students' needs through two sets of parameters. Layer one of the parameter seeks information on the type of ESP required and the particular educational or occupational purpose in question; the physical and psycho-social setting in which the language will be used; the social relationship in which the

participant will be involved; and the medium, mode and channel of communication required. All these can be seen as primary, non-linguistic constraints on the language user. The second set of parameters concerns linguistic data related to dialect; target level required, etc. Thus, having assembled a profile of students' needs, Munby gives an exhaustive list of actual language forms needed, i.e. in terms of language skills and language functions.

On the other hand, Mackay R. (Mackay & Mountford 1978) gives a useful first hand experience in identifying the nature of the learner's needs. He suggests two formal ways of gathering the necessary information on learners' needs:

- i) by a questionnaire to be completed by the learner or teacher,
- ii) by means of a structured interview.

The University of Malaya English for Special Purposes Project (UMESPP) team used the following instruments:

- i) Questionnaires and interviews with students, language teachers and subject teachers.
- ii) A reading attainment test.
- iii) Some diagnostic tests.
- iv) Discussions with ESP specialists in United Kingdom.
- v) A pre-pilot testing of sample materials.

Mead, <sup>1</sup> R (1983) and Candlin, Kirkwood and Moore (1978) believe that course design should be viewed as stages or activities that are interactive and that the planners or writers should accommodate changes at any one stage.

Candlin et al. propose a model of course design that examines the theoretical issues and practical considerations that arise in the planning and implementation of the course (Fig. 1).

The model shows that :

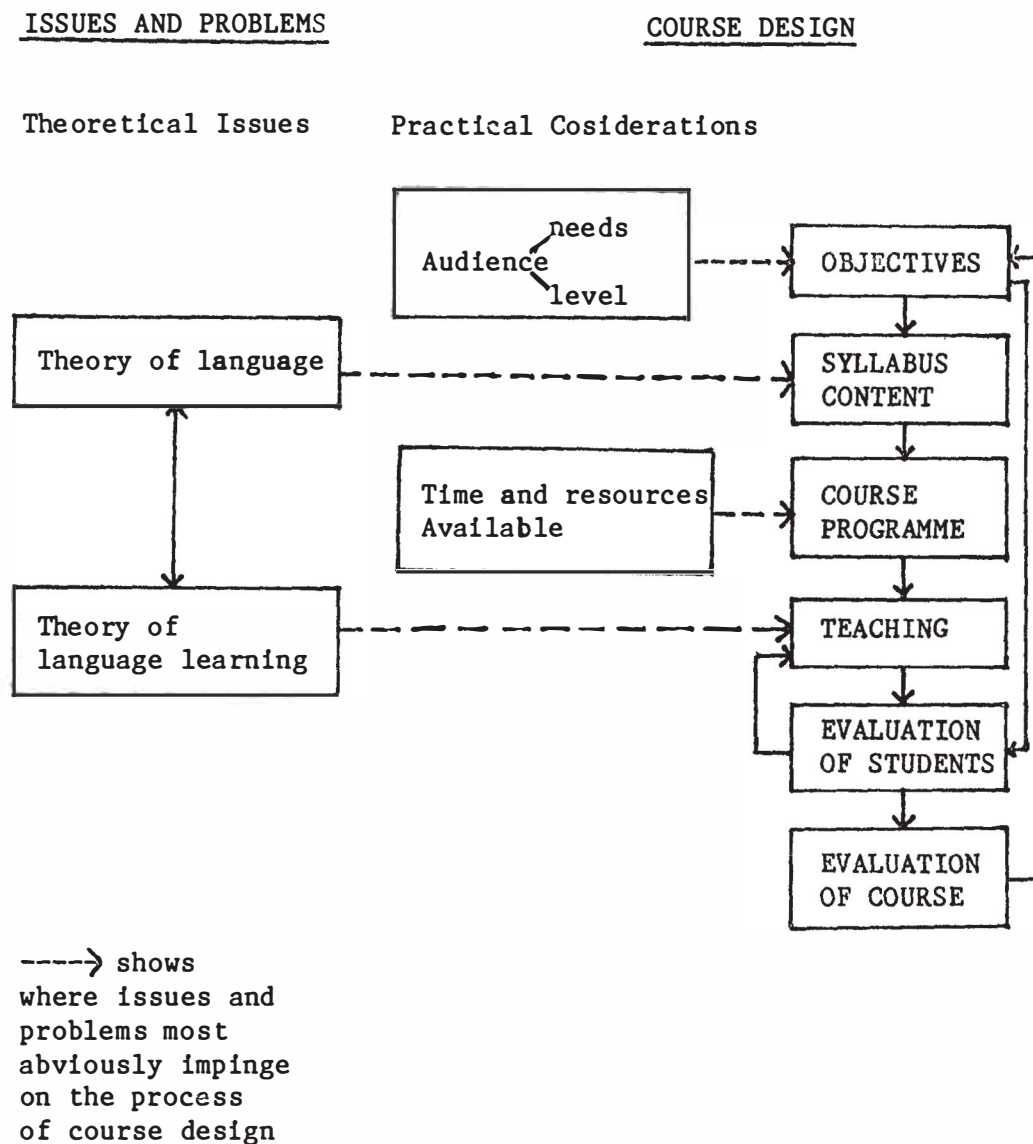
"although each section has its own intrinsic issues, the outcome of the whole process (i.e. the course actually taught) derives from a consideration of each section in relation to others". Candlin et al. (1978:192).

The model provides a useful framework as the stages in coursedesign are not reviewed as discrete areas for decision, able to be approached independently of each other. Rather, the stages are viewed as part of an interactive process where, for example, course writers, after evaluating the course may have to go back to modify course objectives and thus syllabus content, course performance, etc.

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<sup>1</sup> In the M.A. Seminar: 'Problems that arise in making an analysis of the Language learner's needs and in applying this analysis in a language syllabus' presented at Universiti Malaya, April 1983.

Figure 1. A Model of Course Design.



Source: Candlin et al. p.191

Syllabus content in an ESP course, especially in an EAP course, is usually built around a skill. In Malaysia for example, most undergraduates would need English to extract information from textbooks, periodicals and journals. So the course target would be low, in that it could aim at attaining skill in reading and understanding English only, for which a short and intensive course would suffice. When more time is allocated in learning English, the syllabus should incorporate

the learning of other skills (apart from reading and comprehension) as combining skills in language learning is more realistic and would prevent boredom too. These factors - integration of skills and motivation - are considered in the syllabus design of the UMESPP project (Chitravelu, N. 1980).

Materials for ESP are usually organised around topics and situations related to the students' subject specialisation. Materials production in ESP range from the use of authentic data to the use of constructed texts. Some critics object to the use of reading passages which exemplify selected structural and lexical items because the passages are not derived from the 'real' world. On the other hand, the blind use of authentic texts while being authentic may not be relevant - on the grounds of function and audience. The problem of bridging the gap between constructed texts even if graded in terms of difficulty - and the frequently untypical texts of the real world is still unresolved.

Allen and Widdowson (1974) advocate the use of materials that develop: (i) the ability to recognise how sentences are used in the performance of acts of communication, i.e. the ability to understand the rhetorical functioning of language in use, and (ii) the ability to recognise and manipulate the formal devices which are used to combine sentences to create continuous passages of prose. The teaching materials found in "English in Physical Science" were written with this approach.

Much of the early ESP materials concentrated on grammatical exercises. Allen and Widdowson write with the shift in focus from the grammatical to the communicative





properties of the language. This is based on the view that:

"the difficulties which the students encounter arise not so much from a defective knowledge of the system of English, but from an unfamiliarity with English use, and that consequently their needs cannot be met by a course which simply provides further practice in the composition of sentences, but only by one which develops a knowledge of how sentences are used in the performance of different communicative acts". (Mackay and Mountford 1978:58).

Whilst a great deal of attention has been given to production of language teaching materials in ESP, the questions of evaluation of the materials have not received the same degree of attention. Perhaps it is because ESP is still a 'new' field. Alderson and Williamson (unpublished manuscript) lament the situation:

"Yet how is the language teacher or the Head of Department or the programme designer to decide which teaching methodology to use; ... which supplementary materials might be more effective than another, which specific reading course might best achieve its objectives? How is the materials writer to know whether the materials he has produced are superior to what is already available, in order to justify their future use? And how is he to gather information which will enable him to modify the materials to make them more suitable for their intended audience and purpose?"

The above researchers have suggested that teaching materials be evaluated by two distinct techniques: (a) revision evaluation and (b) performance evaluation. In revision evaluation, they aim at getting information about the materials being used at four different levels of interest: (i) the course as a whole; (ii) each unit in the course; (iii) each exercise in each unit; (iv) each item in each exercise; because they feel that each level would have different interests to different people.