English for communication in the workplace

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Introduction

If you are teaching or planning to teach English to help your students communicate effectively in their present or future place of work, you may already be searching for published courses, or perhaps producing your own materials. What guidelines should you follow in selecting or producing good vocational English (VE) materials?

All ESP courses should begin with an assessment of the learners’ needs, and VE materials are no exception. An important aspect of needs analysis is the target situation – the workplace – in which the learners need (now or in the future) to operate.

Nowadays a workplace can be any combination of physical, virtual, local, global, monolingual, or multilingual in nature. Whatever the configuration, communication at work is an interaction within and between discourse communities.

Practitioners in one industry or profession interact with one another and with the shared practices and knowledge base of their discourse community. In addition, they have to deal with members of other discourse communities, such as the general public, customers, contractors, suppliers, or experts in other fields.

For example, oil and gas workers communicate not only with other members of their immediate work teams and bosses, but also with specialist engineers, lorry drivers, safety inspectors, investigators, security guards and training officers. Nurses communicate with other nurses, but also upwards with charge nurses, doctors and administrators, downwards with student nurses and, importantly, sideways with patients.

Communication in the workplace is complex, and the challenge for anyone trying to create effective and realistic VE materials is to take full account of this complexity while keeping the materials relatively simple, especially at lower language competency levels.

Features of effective vocational English materials

Outlined below are four key features of effective VE Materials. When developing materials these features need to be taken into consideration to ensure that the course meets students’ needs by taking as a starting point the way in which people actually communicate at work. Examples below are taken from the new Pearson Vocational English series. This series is designed for students in vocational education and in-company trainees, currently covering five industries: Nursing, IT, Banking & Finance, Construction, Oil & Gas- all at two CEF language levels (A1-A2 and A2-B1).
1. Workplace practices and procedures

A task-based approach is a common feature of many ESP materials these days, for very good pedagogical reasons. In VE materials it is important that the communication tasks go one stage further: they should be closely aligned with actual work practices and procedures that practitioners follow in the workplace.

In the example below, students listen to an audio of a nurse explaining a patient’s vital signs: temperature, blood pressure and respiration rate. As they listen, the students complete the patient observation chart below. (An earlier activity checked that students know that ‘BP’ stands for ‘blood pressure’, ‘O₂ Sats’ for ‘oxygen saturation’ and so on). The chart is one which is actually used in hospitals; the communication task is clearly aligned with workplace practice.

2. Communication at work

Effective VE materials should accurately reflect the actual roles, hierarchies and communication networks of the workplace, that is, who normally communicates with whom, about what, how, why and when. This would include not only formal channels of communication (as shown in a company’s organogram or job descriptions), but also informal channels, including ‘water-cooler’ talk. The materials should take account of the variety of networks, roles and relationships in the workplace and be sensitive to how this affects the linguistic form of the message. Here is an example taken from the oil and gas industry:

In oil and gas exploration, a ‘shooter’ is in charge of explosives, so his instructions to his assistant must be firm, clear and concise. The assistant needs to confirm he has understood. A relationship of mutual trust needs to be maintained (‘Sorry’; ‘No problem’). Full sentences
are not necessary for full intelligibility, or realistic in this workplace situation. Here is an extract from the audio:

**Listening 2**

*Listen to and read the conversation.*

**Shooter:** OK, your first job. Explosives are dangerous, so be careful.
**Assistant:** OK.
**Shooter:** First of all, turn off that phone. No phones with explosives.
**Assistant:** Sorry.
**Shooter:** No problem. Now, bring the box over here.
**Assistant:** OK.
**Shooter:** And put the spare cables on the truck. Yellow on the right, red on the left.
**Assistant:** OK.
**Shooter:** And keep an eye on the road. Any cars, call me. OK?
**Assistant:** OK.
**Shooter:** And don’t touch that flask. It’s my coffee. Not yours!
**Assistant:** OK!

Taken from: English for the Oil Industry Level 1 (Pearson)

### 3. On-the-job and formal training at work

VE materials should reflect the important role of both on-the-job training and formal training in the workplace. Intraining, an experienced practitioner, supervisor or instructor explains working practice or technology to a new recruit or apprentice while they are actually doing the job together. The examples from Oil & Gas (above) and the example below reflect this situation.

In this example, a series of activities are built around the topic of how to operate a crane. In one activity, a crane driver tells an apprentice what to do. Students study a diagram and complete the text.

**Vocabulary 5**

A crane driver is describing to an apprentice how to operate a crane. Look at A–C and complete this text.

*There are two levers. First, the lever on the left. Push it away from you to (1) _______ the load. Pull it towards you to (2) _______ it. OK? Second, the lever on the right. This moves the load (3) _______ or right. To move the load to the left, pull it (4) _______ you. To move the load to the right, push it (5) _______ from you. Any questions?*

Taken from: English for Construction Level 1 (Pearson)
In a later activity, students complete a task while listening to an explanation of how to control the crane.

![Crane control diagram]

**Listening 5** Listen to a description of crane controls and look at A and B. Then complete this text:

Crane operators use different controls to raise and lower the (1) __________, rotate the cab, extend and retract the boom, wind and unwind the (2) __________, and control other equipment. This operator has two (3) ________. One controls left-to-right movement of the boom and the other controls forward and backward movement. The operator uses the foot (4) ________ to retract or extend the boom.

**Reading 6** Listen again and check your answers to 5.

Taken from: English for Construction Level 1 (Pearson)

In a third activity, students read a short expository text and label a diagram of a remote control panel:

![Remote control panel diagram]

**Reading 7** Read this text about a remote control and label the illustration.

Sometimes crane operators use remote controls. In this model there’s a stop button on the left. There’s a key switch on the right. There are two joysticks in the middle. There are three toggle switches on the top.

Taken from: English for Construction Level 1 (Pearson)

This sequence of reading and listening activities reflects three modes of training in the workplace: (1) OTJ training with an apprentice (2) formal training where the trainee listens to an instructor’s presentation, and (3) formal training where the trainee reads a practical training manual.

**4. Producing a language syllabus**

How do we decide which items of language to select for teaching in a VE course? The overriding criterion should be immediate and frequent usefulness for workplace communication. Observation and analysis of discourse communities in the workplace, including work practices and communication networks (see above), indicate the important and frequent kinds of transactions and interactions which occur within and between discourse communities.

From these we can discover the key language functions within these transactions. The final stage is to decide on a grammar syllabus that will capture these functions using simple language exponents. Corpus data, where available, can add value by indicating which forms...
are most frequently used, in which contexts and with which collocations, in the specific industry.

In my experience of teaching VE, I have found that time is always a scarce commodity, since language courses tend to be squeezed into already crowded college timetables or work shifts. This adds to the pressure to ensure that we are teaching only that subset of language which is essential for workplace communication.

Instead of aiming for a complete mastery of all aspects of English grammar or pronunciation, a major criterion is mutual intelligibility. Syllable and word stress, for example, are often more crucial to intelligibility than phonemic accuracy.

Similarly, vocabulary must be chosen with a rigorous attention to need. Essential technical terms from the physical environment (its tools, instruments and equipment) and some key concepts of the industry must be carefully selected. High-frequency semi-technical terms, as well as common word clusters and collocations in use in the field will also be needed.

For example, banking employees are trained to find out the customer’s needs before recommending a solution. The activities below reflect these aspects of workplace training.

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**Reading 6**

Read the customer information from the website of a bank. Are these sentences true (T), false (F) or is there no information in the text (NI)?

1. The bank offers current and deposit accounts, and loans. ___
2. You can get a safe deposit box. ___
3. You can earn interest with a current account. ___
4. You can talk to an expert about your financial needs. ___
5. Customers can only use cash dispensers at the bank. ___
6. You receive statements by post once a month. ___
7. You can only get short-term loans at this bank. ___
8. You need a bank card to withdraw money from the cash dispenser. ___

**Universal Bank**

We are a full service bank and offer products to both large and small customers. For people who want to regularly deposit and withdraw money, we suggest opening a current account with us. You can receive your salary through direct deposit and pay your bills through direct debit. With your bank card you can withdraw money from cash dispensers everywhere and at any time. You can also get your statements of account from the machines at the bank so you know how much money you have in your account.

For people who want to save money, we suggest a deposit account. With this account you can save money for the future and earn interest on it. We have both long-term and short-term deposit accounts. You can decide.

And when you need to borrow money, you can come to us. We arrange long-term or short-term loans. Whatever your financial needs are, we are here to help. Talk to one of our experts today!

**Language**

**Making suggestions and recommendations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Finding out what a customer needs</th>
<th>Can I help you?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do you need to withdraw money?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Would you like to see your account online?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Giving a customer advice         | I suggest/recommend a deposit account. |
|----------------------------------| I suggest/recommend opening a current account. |

7 Work in pairs. Take turns to ask a customer questions and make suggestions based on the customer information in 6.

- Do you need to deposit money regularly into your account?
- Then I suggest a current account.

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Taken from: English for English for Banking and Finance Level 2 (Pearson)
Conclusion

In this article, I have emphasized the importance in VE materials of familiarity with the workplace and its associated technology, working practices, discourse communities and patterns and networks of communication. Each course in the Pearson Vocational English series follows a strong grammar syllabus based on workplace communication needs, and teaches a specialist vocabulary through clear contextualisation in texts and visuals.

The materials do not require students to have much prior knowledge about the industry, and there is a lot of free online support for teachers, including teaching notes, information about the industry, editable tests and a multilingual wordlist for each unit. There is a student CD-ROM with interactive glossaries in British and American English and a full course book audio in MP3 format.

The authors of the books in the series, in addition to being experienced ESP trainers, have had substantial exposure to the working environment of their chosen industry through a combination of work experience, participant observation and long-term collaboration with practitioners and experts in the field. In addition, specialist advisers have contributed to the editing stage by double-checking the accuracy of all references to workplace practices and technical terms.

If you are planning to teach using a published Course Book or develop your own vocational English course, I hope that the information and suggestions in this article have helped you to provide the best possible learning outcomes for your students.

www.pearsonELT.com/vocationalenglish