

English for communication in the workplace

by David Bonamy

Introduction

If you have started reading this article you are already – or may soon be – teaching English to help your students communicate effectively in their present or future place of work. If this is the case, you will already be searching for published courses or perhaps attempting to produce your own materials.

What guidelines should we follow in selecting or producing good vocational English (VE) materials? In this article, I'll attempt to answer that question, based on my experience of teaching, teacher-training, writing and editing in the field of English for specific purposes (ESP).

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 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 with charge nurses, doctors and administrators, with student nurses and, importantly, 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 proficiency levels.

Features of effective vocational English materials

Our course will be more likely to meet our students' needs if our starting point is an understanding of how people actually communicate at work. I will now briefly outline four features of effective VE materials, with some examples¹ from newly published materials.

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.

Example from *Vocational English for Nursing*

¹ Examples are loosely based on activities in the Pearson Vocational English series (see Conclusion for more details), but are not actual extracts from the books. My thanks are due to the authors of *English for Nursing*, *Oil & Gas*, *Construction*, *Banking & Finance* and *Information Technology*.

Students listen to an audio track of a nurse explaining a patient's vital signs, such as temperature, blood pressure and respiration rate. Here is an extract from the audio:

Nurse: His temperature is at thirty-seven, so that's OK. Pulse is at 128 and respiration rate is still high at thirty-three breaths per minute ...

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 aligned with workplace practice.

Patient name:					Date of birth:	
BP	P	RR	T	Wt	O ₂ Sats	Signature
	128	33	37			

2. Communication at work

Effective VE materials should accurately reflect the actual roles, hierarchies and communication networks of the workplace – *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 are two contrasting examples:

Example from *Vocational English for Oil & Gas*

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 using short phrases such as 'Sorry' and 'No problem'. Full sentences are not necessary for full intelligibility, or realistic in this workplace situation. Here is an extract from the audio:

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.

Example from *Vocational English for Nursing*

By way of contrast, the nurse in the audio extract below is also giving instructions, but because her interlocutor is a patient, the pragmatics (and therefore the language) are different from the above example in a number of ways. Polite requests are interspersed with explanations intended to put the patient at ease.

Nurse: Can you give me your right hand, please? I'll just clip this little meter to your finger ... That's right.

Patient: Will it hurt?

Nurse: No, it won't ...

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

VE materials should reflect the important role of both on-the-job (OTJ) and formal training in the workplace. In OTJ, 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 *Vocational English for Oil & Gas*

(above) and *Vocational English for Information Technology* (below) reflect this situation. Here is another example:

Example from *Vocational English for Construction*

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 a text. Here is an extract from the audio:

There are two levers. First, the lever on the left. Push it away from you to (1) _____ the load ... (The diagram illustrates that pushing the lever away raises the load.)

In a later activity, students complete a task while listening to an explanation of how to control the crane. Here is an extract from the audio:

Crane operators use different controls to raise and lower the boom ... This operator has two joysticks. One controls left-to-right movement of the boom ...

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

In this diagram [of a remote control], there's a stop button on the left ...

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, in which contexts and with which collocations, are most frequently used 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, such as 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.

Example from *Vocational English for Banking & Finance*

Banking employees are trained to find out a customer's needs before recommending a solution. The following language box reflects this aspect of workplace training.

Finding out what a customer needs	<i>Do you need to withdraw money?</i> <i>Would you like to see your account online?</i>
Giving a customer advice	<i>I suggest/recommend a deposit account.</i> <i>I suggest/recommend opening a current account.</i>

Example from *Vocational English for Information Technology*

A software developer (instructor) is explaining to a trainee how to write computer code for controlling a robot's movements by pressing keys on a mobile phone. (In an earlier activity, students have discovered that 'g_Move' is a variable which can have different values such as '1' or '2'.) Here is an extract from the audio:

Trainee: So ... if you press 'f' on the phone, g_Move becomes 2 and the robot moves forwards 2 steps?

Instructor: Well, the first bit's right. Yes, g_Move becomes 2. But 2 actually makes the robot move back a step.

The associated language box presents two simple forms that express the function of 'explaining causation':

Explaining how something causes or controls something:	<i>The 'f' key makes the robot go backwards.</i> <i>This instruction causes the computer to print something.</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>make + bare infinitive</i> • <i>cause + to infinitive</i> 	

Conclusion

In this article, I have emphasised the importance of familiarity with the workplace and its associated technology, working practices, discourse communities and patterns and networks of communication in VE materials.

I have drawn examples from the new Pearson *Vocational English* series, of which I am the series editor. The series is based on the principles and guidelines discussed in the article. I will now briefly mention some of the key features of the series.

The series is designed for students in vocational education and in-company trainees, currently covering five industries (Nursing, IT, Banking & Finance, Construction, Oil & Gas) and two CEF language levels (A1–A2 and A2–B1).

Each course 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.

If you are planning to teach a vocational English course, I hope that the information and suggestions in this article have helped you to provide the best possible learning opportunities for your students.

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