

Multi-Disciplinary English for Specific Purposes (ESP) Courses: A New Dimension to Creative English Language Teaching (ELT)

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Abstract

Creativity in English Language Teaching (ELT) has a number of features. One of these features is about activities in which connections are made between unrelated things (Maley, 2015, Richards, 2013, and Tin, 2013). This paper adds a “creative” dimension to this feature by looking at it not just at the level of activities, but also at the wider scope of the contents of a course. This dimension relates to my experience in developing two English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses for the college where I work in Oman. Although the courses are ESP courses, they make connections between different disciplines in order to satisfy students’ needs in the best way. The paper explains the rationale for developing such courses and explains the “creative” dimension in them using examples from the books which I have written for the courses. The paper concludes by discussing the implications for ELT and the limitations of the course development experience. Finally, it highlights areas for research.

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Key words: Creativity in ELT, making connections between unrelated things, ESP, English for Occupational/ Vocational/ Professional Purposes (EOP/ EVP/ EPP), English for Academic Purposes (EAP), English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP), English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP), and developing courses.

1. Introduction

This paper looks at my experience in developing creative ESP courses. The paper, thus, combines two important areas of ELT: creativity in ELT and ESP.

Creativity in ELT is important because it is useful for both students and teachers. In terms of students, creative ELT can raise students’ awareness of their creative abilities and result in increased levels of confidence, motivation, and effective learning (Maley, 2015). For teachers, creativity can be a source of professional development, self-satisfaction, and motivation (Richards, 2013).

ESP, which is broadly defined as English that satisfies the needs of a particular group of students (e.g. students who are doing a particular specialization) (Islam, 2014 and Mohammed, 2012), is also important. This is because English is the medium of instruction at many colleges and universities, even in countries where it is not the first language.

In the next section, the paper presents a brief literature review. Then, it focuses on the ESP courses I have developed, shedding light on the context where they were developed, the rationale for developing them, and the creative aspect in them. Finally, the paper discusses the implications for ELT and the limitations of the course development experience and highlights areas for research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Creativity in ELT

Creativity in ELT has a number of features. These include imagination (Rushidi, 2013), problem solving (Richards, 2013, and Rushidi, 2013) and making connections between unrelated things (Maley, 2015, Richards, 2013, and Tin, 2013). Andrea (2012) and Constantinides (2010) present four other features of creativity in ELT. These are as follows:

- Fluency: This means coming up with many ideas.
- Flexibility: This means generating ideas of different types and looking at things from different perspectives.
- Elaboration: This means using one's existing knowledge and elaborating on it in order to expand it.
- Originality: This means coming up with new ideas.

Creativity in ELT is about both creative teachers and creative students (see, for example, Tin, 2013). So, all the above features apply to both teachers and students. Students' creativity, however, requires elicitation by teachers through the activities they use. For instance, if a teacher wants to teach vocabulary of shapes (e.g. circle, cone), "fluency" would mean that the teacher thinks of many ways to teach the vocabulary. In terms of students, it would mean, for example, doing a task like the one given in the box below that requires them to use as many words of shapes as possible.

Work in groups. Imagine that you are working for a company which is planning to make a unique product in order to increase its sales. Invent a product that makes use of as many shapes as possible and draw a picture of it. Then, give a presentation about your invention, using your picture.

(Al-Lawati, 2015a, p. 5)

The available literature presents a lot of examples of how the above mentioned features of creativity can be put into practice (see, for example, Constantinides, 2010, Maley, 2015, Stepanek, 2015, and Tin, 2013). The focus here, however, is placed on some examples of the feature of "making connections between unrelated things" because this feature is the most relevant to the topic of this paper.

Tin (2013) uses the term “multicultural experiences” to refer to “making connections between unrelated things”. He points out that “(b)eing simultaneously exposed to different experiences can lead to cognitive flexibility and creativity” (Tin, 2013, p. 4). He further explains that:

Creativity can be enhanced when one is exposed to multiple experiences either on a small scale (for example having different experiences in our daily life such as teaching versus playing sports) or on a large scale (for example living in different countries).

(Tin, 2013, p. 4)

Tin (2013) presents a number of examples of activities that are built on “multicultural experiences”. One of these is asking students to make connections between language of recipes and language of characteristics in order to write about friendship. He shows that such an activity can result in the following creative use of language:

Recipe poem: friendship

A drop of humour
A cup of kindness
A kilo of tolerance
Two pounds of understanding
A bunch of communication
A clove of laughter and silliness
A tablespoon of trouble-making.
Put them all in a blender
To make a mayonnaise of friendship.

(Tin, 2013, pp. 4 and 5)

Maley (2015) refers to “making connections between unrelated things” as “the random principle”. He defines it as “putting two or more things together that do not belong together and finding connections” (Maley, 2015, p. 11). Then, he gives the following activity as an example.

Students are given pictures of five people taken at random from magazines. They then have to write a story involving all five characters.

(Maley, 2015, p. 11)

As can be seen, “making connections between unrelated things” in the examples given above is done within activities that specify a framework in which the connections are made. In the first example, the framework is writing about friendship, whereas in the second example the framework is writing a story.

The feature of “making connections between unrelated things” has been used in a creative way in the experience described in this paper, which highlights the importance of the experience. The creative use of the feature is about “making connections between unrelated things” not only at the level of separate activities, but also at the wider scope of the contents of a course. The aim of doing this was to develop ESP courses that could satisfy the needs of students of different specializations. This was done by “making connections between points related to different specializations” within a framework of entrepreneurship. This is discussed in detail in Section 3.3.

2.2 ESP

As mentioned previously, ESP is broadly defined as English that satisfies the needs of a particular group of students (e.g. students who are doing a particular specialization) (Islam, 2014 and Mohammed, 2012). It is different from English for General Purposes (EGP), which “focuses on general English language abilities of students” (Islam, 2014, p. 67) and is relevant to “contexts where learners have no easily recognizable reason to learn the language” (Islam, 2014, p. 68).

Jordan (1997 in Shing and Sim, 2011) divides ESP into two main types. The first type is English for Occupational/ Vocational/ Professional Purposes (EOP/ EVP/ EPP). When applied to doctors, for example, this type of ESP would mean focusing on things such as conversations between doctors and patients. The second type of ESP Jordan (1997 in Shing and Sim, 2011) identifies is English for Academic Purposes (EAP). This addresses the needs of students so that they can cope with the demands of their subject area studies. He subdivides EAP into English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) and English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP). The former is about skills that are relevant to all students regardless of their specializations, such as paraphrasing, summarizing, and note-taking. The latter is relevant to the needs of students of a particular specialization, such as vocabulary of medicine for medical students.

In this paper, I adopt the above distinction between EOP/ EVP/ EPP, EGAP, and ESAP, as it will help clarify the points I will discuss later about the ESP courses I have developed. I should point out, however, that I think that EOP/ EVP/ EPP and ESAP may overlap. For example, the vocabulary addressed in ESAP can also be used when a student graduates and takes up a job relevant to his/her specialization.

3. The multi-disciplinary ESP courses I have developed

3.1 Context

I developed the ESP courses discussed in this paper at the Higher College of Technology (HCT), Oman, where I work as the Academic Coordinator for the Post-Foundation English Language Program.

HCT, Oman, is one of the seven government technical colleges that work under the Ministry of Manpower. It consists of seven specialization departments: Applied Sciences, Business, Engineering, Fashion Design, IT, Pharmacy, and Photography. It also includes an English Language Center (ELC). The language of instruction at the college is English, whereas the native language of the students who study at the college is Arabic.

The ELC offers two programs: Foundation and Post-Foundation. The former consists of four levels. The latter offers four courses: Technical Writing 1 (TW1), Technical Writing 2 (TW2), Technical Communication, and Public Speaking, which are offered in the same order they have just been mentioned. These courses are common courses that are taken by students of all the specializations mentioned above, where students are put together in groups regardless of their specializations.

The ESP courses under consideration in this paper have been developed for TW1 and TW2. Both of these courses are offered at the diploma level and have four contact hours per week. The English language proficiency level of students who take these courses can be considered as lower-intermediate to intermediate. Before developing the ESP courses under consideration in this paper, the contents of the courses focused mainly on writing EGAP essays.

3.2 Rationale for developing the ESP courses

The ESP courses were developed in the beginning of 2012 and have been in use since then. The development of the courses encompassed all the elements of a course, including producing the course description, course learning outcomes, and teaching materials. The teaching materials have recently been published as course books (see Al-Lawati, 2015a, and Al-Lawati, 2015b) and have been adopted by HCT for teaching the ESP courses.

The idea of developing the courses arose while I was working on a project initiated by the Ministry of Manpower in January 2012. The project aimed at reviewing all the post-foundation English courses offered at all the technical colleges that work under the ministry. As part of this project, a needs analysis study was conducted at each college. Because the studies were done for the Ministry of Manpower project, a detailed account about them cannot be given here for ethical reasons. However, it would suffice to mention that I conducted a needs analysis study with the heads and teaching staff of all the specialization departments at HCT to investigate their opinions on the skills that post-foundation English courses should focus on. Generally speaking, the results suggested that the courses should teach all four language skills (i.e. listening, reading, speaking, and writing) and that they should be ESP courses that incorporate both ESAP and EGAP.

It was clear that these results needed about two years to implement, and so I proposed that I use them at a limited scope to develop new ESP TW1 and TW2 courses so that these courses could satisfy students' needs in the best way possible until the Ministry of Manpower project is completed. By "limited scope" I meant keeping the courses as writing courses but adding subject area vocabulary to them and dealing with it in speaking and writing. Subject area vocabulary was chosen to include because it showed to be among the first needs for all specializations. The head of the ELC at that time accepted the proposal but pointed out that separating students according to their specializations and changing the titles of the courses would not be feasible. This was when I realized that I had to develop multi-disciplinary ESP courses whose titles might not reflect their contents precisely.

The overall contents selected for the courses on the basis of the results of the needs analysis study are given in the table below. For the purpose of this paper, the contents are classified into the types of ESP they belong to.

Content	Type of ESP
Get knowledge of subject area vocabulary	ESAP and EOP/EVP/EPP
Writing descriptions	ESAP and EOP/EVP/EPP
Writing lab reports	ESAP and EOP/EVP/EPP
Paraphrasing and quoting	EGAP
Referencing	EGAP
Writing summaries	EGAP
Writing syntheses	EGAP

Table 1: Overall contents of the ESP courses

3.3 Creativity in the ESP courses

3.3.1 Creativity in establishing a framework within which "connections are made" between different specializations

My next task was to find a way to make the above ESAP and EOP/EVP/EPP contents relevant to students of different specializations. In order to be able to do this, I took two main decisions. The first decision was to focus on business and use it in the form of an entrepreneurship framework into which all specializations could be incorporated. This was the major creative dimension that enabled me to "make connections" between different majors at the level of the contents of the courses. The second decision was to also focus on science because it encompasses engineering, IT and pharmacy too, as these are scientific majors. The focus on business and science to develop the ESP courses is in line with Hutchinson and Waters' (1987, in Negrea, 2010) view that ESP can be divided into three areas, two of which are English for Science and Technology and English for Business and Economics.

The above decisions helped me to convert the overall ESAP and EOP/EVP/EPP contents given in Table 1 above to specific ESAP and EOP/EVP/EPP contents for TW1 and TW2. This is shown in the table below.

Overall content	Specific content	Course
Get knowledge of subject area vocabulary	Mathematics vocabulary	TW1
	IT vocabulary	
	Business (entrepreneurship) vocabulary	TW2
Writing descriptions	Writing business (entrepreneurship) descriptions	TW1
	Writing scientific descriptions	
Writing lab reports	Writing business (entrepreneurship) reports that incorporate lab reports	TW2
	Writing scientific lab reports	

Table 2: Specific contents of the ESP courses

The above ESAP and EOP/EVP/EPP contents together with the EGAP contents listed in Table 1 were then approved by the head of the ELC. They proved to be a very appropriate choice of contents, as entrepreneurial skills and all the EGAP skills given in Table 1 were among the graduate attributes included in 2013 in the five-year strategic plan for the technical colleges (Higher College of Technology, 2014).

The next sections address the creative element in Items 3 through 7 of the specific contents listed in Table 2 above and provide examples taken from the books which I have written for the courses and are used at HCT. The first two items in Table 2 (i.e. mathematics and IT vocabulary) are not addressed because they do not represent examples of the creative feature under consideration in this paper (i.e. making connections between unrelated things). However, it should be mentioned that vocabulary of these two particular subjects (i.e. mathematics and IT) were chosen to include in the ESP courses because they relate to the field of science, which I had decided to focus on, and also because they relate to the subject area courses of the different specialization at HCT. The particular mathematics and IT words to teach in the ESP courses were selected in consultation with mathematics and IT teachers in the specialization departments at HCT.

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3.3.2 Creativity in making business (entrepreneurship) vocabulary relevant to different specializations

The business (entrepreneurship) words included in the TW2 ESP course were chosen in collaboration with the Business Department at HCT. In order to show their relevance to all specializations, students are invited to “make connections” between them and their areas of study. For example, the unit which teaches the vocabulary starts with an activity that requires students to think about the relationship between business and other specializations.

Another activity that encourages students to “make connections” between the business vocabulary and their areas of study is given below.

Imagine that you have applied for a job in a company and have been asked to explain what you will contribute to the company. Develop a product related to your major and give a presentation, showing how it will boost the company's business. Use as many words you learnt in this unit as possible. Work with a group of students who are majoring in the same area as you are and then choose one of you to give the presentation.

(Al-Lawati , 2015b, p. 7)

3.3.3 Creativity in “making connections” between different specializations through written descriptions

As shown in Table 2 above, two types of descriptions are included in the ESP courses: business (entrepreneurship) descriptions and scientific descriptions. The former is taught through essays that describe places/food/objects within the context of advertisements so that the essays become relevant to businesses related to different specializations. For example, the unit which teaches these essays presents a sample essay in which a diner is described. Then, it asks students to answer the following questions to bring to their attention the fact that such a type of essay can be used to advertise businesses relevant to different specializations:

1. In your opinion, how does this essay relate to business?
2. In your opinion, how can this essay be relevant to science, engineering, fashion design, photography, and information technology? In terms of information technology, for example, think of a situation where the owners of the diner described in the essay want to make the diner an Internet Diner.

(Al-Lawati , 2015a, p. 27)

To reinforce the idea that this type of essay can be used to advertise businesses relevant to different specializations, the unit invites students to do activities such as the one given below:

Work individually. Imagine that you have opened a shop that sells one or more products related to your major. In about 300 words, write a descriptive essay to describe your shop. You must also describe the products you sell in the shop. Your essay should have an introduction, at least two body paragraphs, and a conclusion.

(Al-Lawati , 2015a, p. 27)

The unit explains that good business descriptive essays include language that describes sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. Then it uses this to “make a connection” between business descriptive essays and scientific descriptive essays. This is done through the following explanation:

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Just like business descriptive essays, scientific descriptive essays also give sensory details (sight, touch, sound, smell, and taste). In a scientific context, this is called physical description. Physical description may also include a description of the place/position of the subject and how abundant the subject is. Scientific description may also include description of parts/composition as well as functional description. The former describes the parts/composition of the subject (what it is made of, what can be seen inside it, how the parts/composition change(s) under different conditions). The latter describes the function/use of the subject (and its parts).

(Al-Lawati , 2015a, pp. 32-33)

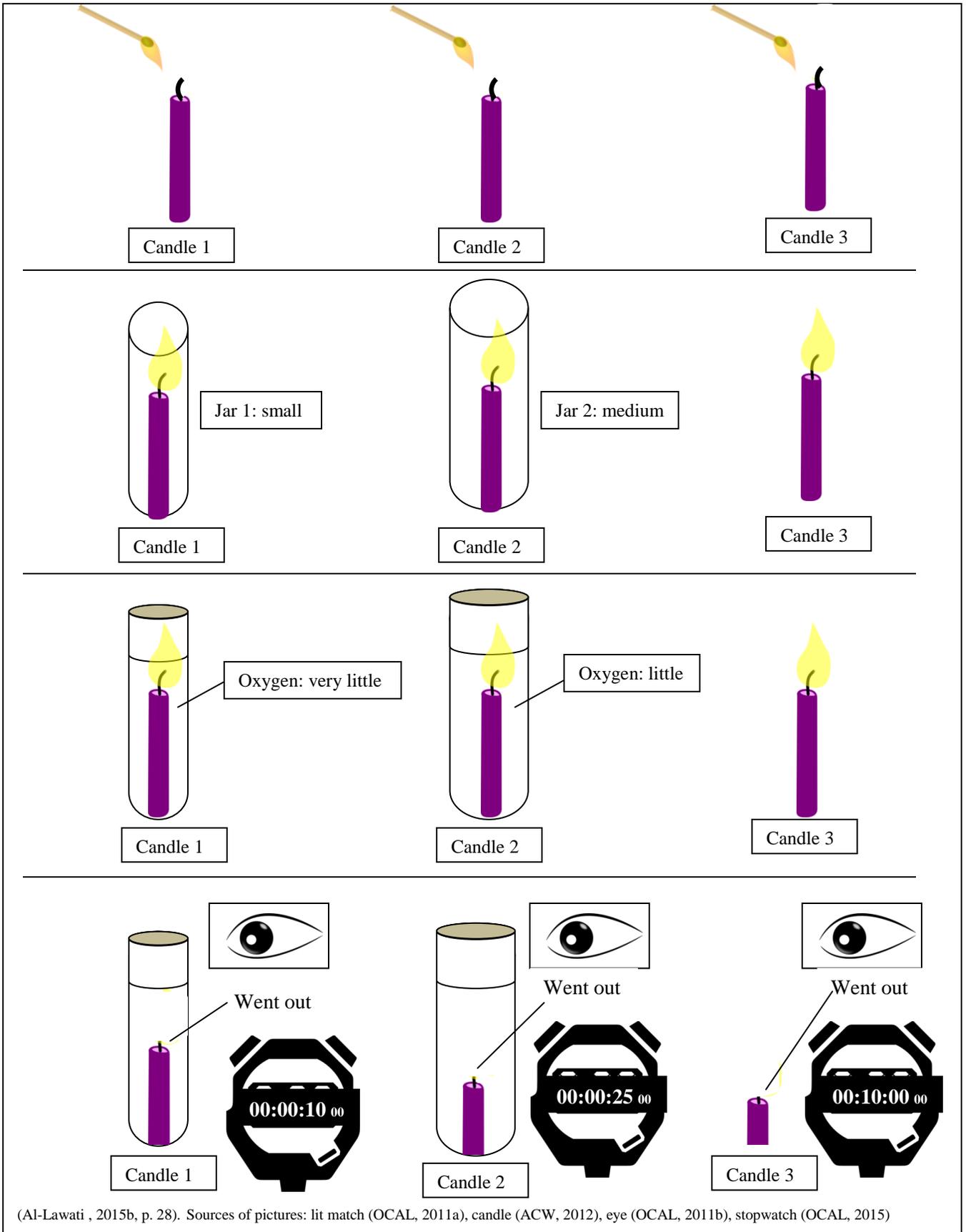
3.3.4 Creativity in “making connections” between different specializations through written reports

As Table 1 shows, the needs analysis study suggested teaching the writing of lab reports. Obviously, such reports are relevant to scientific majors. So in order to make them relevant to other specialization too, lab reports are presented within the context of business (entrepreneurship) reports. In other words, “making connections” between unrelated things is done by teaching business reports whose topics are scientific. This shows the students that regardless of their specializations, their future jobs may involve dealing with scientific topics. So, for example, the unit which teaches the writing of business reports includes the following activity.

Imagine that you work for a company which has made a new type of candle. The manager wants to post information about the high quality of the candle on the company’s website. He wants this information to include details about the ability of the candle to stay lit for a long time. So, he asks you to investigate what can help in keeping the candle lit for a long time. You decide to focus on the amount of oxygen which the candle gets when it is used. Accordingly, you do the experiment shown in the pictures given on the next page. Write a business report on this experiment.

(Al-Lawati , 2015a, p. 27)

The unit, then, presents the following experiment in pictures.



After that, the unit presents the following sample business report.

Report on How the Candle Made by the Company Can Burn for a Long Period of Time

Introduction

The manager has asked me to write this report about how the candle manufactured by the company can keep burning for as long as possible.

Terms of reference

Details about the high quality of the candle must be provided on the company's website. This should include information about the fact that the candle can stay lit for very long. In order to find out what can help in keeping the candle lit for the longest time possible, I decided to study the effect of the amount of oxygen around a candle on the burning time of the candle. The amounts of oxygen I looked at were very little oxygen, little oxygen, and the normal amount of oxygen available in the air.

Method

First, I brought 3 candles and lit them. Then, I placed the first candle in a small jar and the second candle in a medium size jar. However, I did not put the third candle in any jar. After that, I covered the jars in which I had put the first and second candles. So, the oxygen around the first candle in the small jar became very little, whereas the oxygen around the second candle in the medium size jar became little. In contrast, the oxygen around the third candle was of the normal amount available in the air because I had not put the candle in a jar. Then, I observed all the candles to see when they went out. Finally, I recorded the results in the table given below.

Results and discussion

The results are shown in Table 1 below.

Candle number	Amount of oxygen it got	When it went out
1	Very little	At 10 sec
2	Little	At 25 sec
3	The normal amount available in the air	At 10 min

Table 1: The effect of the amount of oxygen which the candles got on the duration for which they burned

As the table above shows, the first candle, which got very little oxygen, was the first candle to go out. The second candle, which got little oxygen, burned just 15 sec more than the first candle did. However, the third candle, which was exposed to the normal amount of oxygen available in the air, stayed lit for the longest time and went out the last. This not only suggests that the candles needed oxygen to burn, but it also suggests that they needed sufficient oxygen to burn.

Conclusion

The candle made by the company stays lit for the longest time possible when it gets sufficient oxygen, or the normal amount of oxygen available in the air. The duration for which it burns decreases as the amount of oxygen becomes less.

Recommendations

The information posted on the company's website should explain the importance of exposing the candle made by the company to sufficient oxygen so that it stays lit for as long as possible. For further clarification, the experiment above may also be posted on the company's website.

(Al-Lawati , 2015b, p. 29)

The unit then “makes a further connection” between business and scientific reports by using the same pictures above to present a sample scientific report. This is done through the following activity.

The duration for which a candle burns depends on a number of factors. One of these factors is the amount of oxygen which the candle gets when it is used. The pictures given (above) show an experiment that focuses on this factor. Use the pictures to write a scientific report on the experiment.

(Al-Lawati , 2015b, p. 34)

After that, the unit provides the following sample scientific report.

The Effect of the Amount of Oxygen to Which a Candle is Exposed on the Duration for Which the Candle Burns: An Experiment

Aim

To discover the effect of the amount of oxygen to which a candle is exposed on the duration for which it burns.

Hypothesis

The normal amount of oxygen available in the air helps a candle to stay lit for the longest period of time. The duration for which a candle burns decreases as the amount of oxygen it gets becomes less.

Materials

- 3 lit matches
- 3 candles
- 1 small jar
- 1 medium size jar
- 3 stopwatches

Method

Three candles were first lit using 3 lit matches. Then, the first candle was placed in a small jar and the second candle was put in a medium size jar. However, the third candle was not put in any jar. After that, the jars used were covered. So, the oxygen around the first candle in the small jar became very little, whereas the oxygen around the second candle in the medium size jar became little. In contrast, the oxygen around the third candle was of the normal amount available in the air because the candle had not been put in a jar. Then, all the candles were observed to see when they went out. Time was kept track of using 3 stopwatches. Finally, the results were recorded in the table given below.

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Conclusion

A candle stays lit for the longest time possible when it gets sufficient oxygen, or the normal amount of oxygen available in the air. The duration for which a candle burns decreases as the amount of oxygen decreases. This confirms the hypothesis made above.

(Al-Lawati , 2015b, p. 35)

Conclusion

Creativity in ELT has a number of features. One of these features is about activities in which “connections are made” between unrelated things. This paper describes my experience in developing multi-disciplinary ESP courses that add a new dimension to this creative feature by taking it up to the level of “making connections” between the contents of the courses so that they are relevant to the needs of student of different specializations. Such connections show students how the contents are relevant to them, and thus can increase their motivation. This is based on Williams and Williams’ (2010) note that contents that satisfy students’ needs can motivate students.

The creative ESP courses described in the paper have been developed for the college where I work. They would not have been feasible to produce without the support of the head of the English Language Center at the college, who gave me the chance to use such a new way of developing courses. This implies that creative ELT requires institutions that support creativity, a point which is also mentioned by Richards (2013).

Another factor that helped me develop the courses was consulting with some of the specialization departments at the college about the vocabulary to include in the courses. This implies that ESP requires collaboration between ELT teachers/material writers and specialists of other subjects, a point which is also highlighted by Mohammed (2012).

The contents of the creative ESP courses were selected in light of the results of the needs analysis study I conducted with the heads and teachers of the specialization departments at the college where I work to investigate their opinions on the skills to teach in the courses. However, it is not clear whether the courses have satisfied students’ needs. This is a limitation that suggests two main areas of research. The first area is to investigate the opinions of the participants of the needs analysis study on whether the courses have helped in equipping students with the required skills. The second research area is to investigate students’ opinions on how far they find the courses useful to them. These two areas of research would give insights into the extent to which the experience of developing multi-disciplinary ESP courses described in this paper could be followed in other ELT contexts.

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