

EXPLORING ESP COURSE DESIGN FOR STUDENTS OF STAGE, COSTUME AND PUPPET DESIGN

STRUČNI RAD / PROFESSIONAL PAPER

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Abstract

The Department of Creative Technologies of the Academy of Arts and Culture in Osijek offers a unique undergraduate study programme entitled “Design for Theatre, Film and Television”. The aim of the paper is to explore the possibilities of teaching English to students of stage, costume and puppet design, based on collaboration with the teacher of the compulsory course “The History and Theory of Stage and Costume Design”. The common goal is to analyse specific plays, focusing on the descriptions of stage sets, costumes and props, while encouraging students’ visual creativity. This type of collaboration improves students’ motivation since they know that the opportunity to examine certain dramatic texts in their original language (i.e. English) will provide useful knowledge that can be applied when attending the other course. Through careful analyses of plays, students enrich their specialised vocabulary while also gaining insights into British and American culture, as well as the historical and geographical contexts crucial for stage sets, props and costumes. Such analyses facilitate communication in English, encouraging students to exchange their ideas about the creative potential of stage and costume design in these plays. Since their professional work will often involve multicultural and multilingual teams, this type of exercise is highly valuable. In addition to the theoretical discussion about the benefits of this approach, the paper provides several examples of how to analyse the following plays with a focus on stage and costume design: *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde, *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller, *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams and *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder.

Keywords: collaboration, costume / stage design, ESP (English for Specific Purposes), examples, play analysis

1. INTRODUCTION

The Academy of Arts and Culture in Osijek, through its Department of Creative Technologies, offers an undergraduate study programme that is unique in Croatia and the neighbouring countries. This applied arts programme is entitled “Design for Theatre, Film and Television” and it educates future creators of stage sets, costumes and puppets.

Due to the unique nature of the programme, designing an appropriate ESP course is rather challenging. Like any ESP course, “it has to be designed for a specific group of learners who belong to a particular professional context” (Pašalić & Plančić, 2018, p. 211). Since learners’ needs are determined by their future profession and the labour market (Kordić & Papa, 2014, p. 75), ESP teaching at the institutions of higher education should focus on the acquisition of language competence and knowledge that is related to a particular profession as well as on the development of learners’ ability to use the acquired language competence and knowledge in their future professional work (Kordić & Papa, 2014, p. 74).

Therefore, an ESP course should target “the specialized English that the learners require for their work” (Basturkmen, 2025, p. 24), maintaining its focus on the language use “and not the language system itself” (Basturkmen, 2025, p. 30). This paper explores the potential approaches to teaching English to students of stage, costume and puppet design and aims to provide useful and interesting suggestions to those who decide to design a similar ESP course. It offers activities and practical examples accumulated over three years of teaching the course that could be a welcome addition to ESP teaching materials for this particular group of students.

2. COLLABORATION

Research findings indicate that the coordination between ESP courses and profession-specific courses is highly beneficial to both learners and teachers of specialised English. Such forms of collaboration should be improved and encouraged since they “foster professional development and improve classroom effectiveness” (Ghezali, 2021, p. 17). Close collaboration between ESP teachers and their colleagues teaching professional courses is extremely valuable (Kordić & Papa, 2014, p. 74) because it is one of the key elements of a successful teaching process, improving students’ understanding and acquisition of specialised terminology (Drinovac Topalović & Ćurković Denona, 2023, p. 87).

Some authors believe that “ESP teachers should not hesitate to ask for suggestions and advice from their colleagues” (Pašalić & Plančić, 2018, p. 214) who specialise in the respective fields of study because “the urge to collaborate” (Belcher, 2006, p. 140) stems from “concern with limited content knowledge” (Belcher, 2006, p. 140). ESP teachers are usually not specialised in the given areas, so they “may have concerns about their knowledge of the topic” (Basturkmen, 2025, p. 31) and “can seek to establish forms of cooperation with domain specialists” (Basturkmen, 2025, p. 32). The lack of content knowledge “means that collaboration with subject specialists is essential in order to promote relevant communicative activities and choose materials that display authenticity and faithfulness to real-world purposes” (Ghezali, 2021, p. 19). Despite the fact that collaborative teaching has displayed some disadvantages,

“it shows real benefits for both teachers and students” (Ghezali, 2021, p. 23). Until the teachers of specialised English reach the level of “dual professionalism” (Belcher, 2006, p. 140), collaboration seems to be the best solution.

The ESP course at the Department of Creative Technologies of the Academy of Arts and Culture in Osijek is based on the collaboration with Associate Professor Katarina Žeravica, who teaches the compulsory course entitled *The History and Theory of Stage and Costume Design*. Sometimes “institutional constraints and unwillingness of would-be collaborators can be major obstacles to teaching partnerships” (Belcher, 2006, p. 140). However, since there is no such hindrance at the Department of Creative Technologies, it is possible to discuss the advantages of this partnership.

The collaboration began in the summer semester of the 2021/2022 academic year. Since then, 31 students have participated in the newly designed course which is compulsory for first-year and second-year students of the undergraduate study and consists of 4 semesters (30 lecture hours per semester). The low number of students is the result of the admission quotas set by the labour market. However, it still includes every person enrolled in this type of study programme in Croatia and the region. Using both class discussions as well as the university student survey in which they assess the work of their teachers, students have provided positive feedback about the collaboration and the overall design of the ESP course. Since feedback has not been systematically gathered, it will not be presented in the paper.

The design of this course relies on the knowledge and advice from colleagues teaching professional courses. That ensures a greater understanding of the students’ future profession, which, in turn, determines the focus and type of class activities. The formal collaboration discussed in this paper is established on the syllabus level since the two courses overlap slightly in content. For now, this partnership does not extend beyond that, although it still offers many benefits resulting from the analysis of the shared texts.

3. PLAY ANALYSIS

3.1. Aim

The aim of this collaboration is to analyse the following plays: *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde, *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller, *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams and *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder. These plays have been selected because they are included in the reading list of the compulsory course taught by the domain specialist and because they are originally written in English. Some researchers point out the lack of interest for language classes among students who do not study languages, concluding that “the level of participation of students is relatively low as is the level of effort in class assignments” (Martinović & Poljaković, 2010, p. 146).

Students of stage, costume and puppet design are highly motivated by this collaboration because they know that the opportunity to examine these dramatic texts in their original language will provide useful knowledge that they can apply when attending the other course. In other words, they do not have to read and analyse these plays on their own as part of the other course's home assignment. Also, such class discussions about plays simulate the discussions they will have with directors in the near future.

During these analyses, the focus is on the descriptions of stage sets, costumes and props, which enables students "to acquire the ability to communicate in their field" (Basturkmen, 2025, p. 24). Being trained in applied arts, they strongly rely on practical skills and experience. However, "it is very important for all students to enrich the development of their manual skills and orientation to experience with gradual understanding of visual art concepts and rules of visual signs' use within the visual art education process" (Tacol, 2005, p. 122). The cognitive development of students studying the visual arts "should not be omitted" (Tacol, 2005, p. 125). According to another author, each work of art is the result of a complex creative process in which the manual skill is accompanied by creative thinking (Skender, 2018, p. 444). Keeping that in mind, students' visual creativity is strongly encouraged. After all, visual creativity will be an important aspect of their future profession.

In order to recreate the conversations that they will have with the director and other members of the production team, in which they have to present and justify their design, class discussions are the most frequently used class activity. They foster creative thinking and visual creativity, encourage the use of the newly acquired vocabulary, develop the understanding of the text and improve communication skills.

3.2. Examples

The selected plays offer a wide range of discussion topics which usually focus on unusual stage design or creative decisions regarding costumes and props. Students encounter these elements as they read the text in class. Being an essential and frequently used skill in their future work, reading is encouraged by role-play. Since student groups at the Department of Creative Technologies are quite small, a different character can be assigned to each student. Taking on the identity of their character and occasionally trying to predict their actions, students are immersed in the text. They begin to understand their characters better, which improves the design of their costumes. Role-play ensures a more engaging class discussion and the following text offers several examples of discussion topics.

The first example concerns the stage set. It involves the house of Willy Loman and his family in *Death of a Salesman*. According to the stage directions, the "small, fragile-seeming home" (Miller, 1977, p. 11) is surrounded on all sides by apartment houses.

Also, the set should be “wholly or, in some places, partially transparent” (Miller, 1977, pp. 11-12). Its construction should provide the audience with important information – when “the action is in the present the actors observe the imaginary wall-lines” (Miller, 1977, pp. 11-12), opening doors in order to enter rooms, but the scenes of the past are characterised by a disregard for these boundaries, with actors stepping “through” (Miller, 1977, pp. 11-12) walls. For instance, the set designed by Jo Mielziner, a famous American stage designer, was a great success because it managed to convey the feeling that the past and the present were happening at the same time. The construction of the play merges current events with distant memories and the stage set plays a major role in helping the audience follow the story.

The second example deals with the costumes of Lane, Merriman and Miss Prism, the three servants in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Although the stage directions do not specify their costumes, this lack of information can be used to provoke the visual creativity of students. After all, the play does specify the function of each character in the household: Lane is a manservant, Merriman is a butler and Miss Prism is a governess. Once students become aware of the difference between a manservant (who prepares food and clothes for his employer) and a butler (who organises the other servants), the design of their costumes becomes less arbitrary. Miss Prism is a governess (a woman who lives with a rich family, teaching the children in their home), but her character may provide additional clues about her clothes. Since students learn quite a lot about her personality, these character traits can be used to determine the form, colour and fabric of her costume.

The third example does not address the creation, but the lack of stage props in *Our Town*. Actors simply go “through the motions” (Wilder, 1985, p. 8). Most of the objects are not supposed to be created since they are invisible, imaginary. Even the stage design is minimal. Although the other correlated course will provide students with historical and theoretical reasons for such an approach, this opportunity can be used to encourage conversation in English, discovering how students feel about this lack of stage design and the need to restrain their professional creativity.

The final example shows a rare transition of the following type: stage set → prop → costume. In the second act of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, there is a scene in which Algernon asks Cecily to provide him with a flower which he could wear in his lapel. The stage directions indicate that this happens in a garden, “an old-fashioned one full of roses” (Wilde, 1997, p. 684). Cecily offers him a “Maréchal Niel” (Wilde, 1997, p. 688) rose and while some readers of the play may regard this piece of information to be insignificant, the students of stage, costume and puppet design have to know that these roses are yellow, otherwise their portrayal of the garden could be inaccurate. Algernon refuses the yellow rose, choosing a pink one instead. Cecily cuts the pink flower and puts it in Algernon’s lapel. This brief scene demonstrates the unusual journey of the pink rose: initially, it is an element of the stage set, then it turns into

a prop and, finally, it becomes an essential feature of Algernon's costume. Topics like these encourage students to participate in class discussions.

3.3. History and geography

By carefully analysing these plays, teachers can foster communication in English and encourage students to exchange their ideas about the creative potential of stage, costume and prop design. However, teachers have to make sure that their students pay close attention to historical and geographical contexts. Without a clear understanding of the given historical period and geographical location, students will not be able to create appropriate sets, costumes and props. Every traditional production of these plays will require this type of knowledge. Even contemporary productions which tend to intentionally disregard the detailed guidance of stage directions will intrinsically rely on this knowledge in order to make the new interpretations more meaningful. Any discussion about the sets, costumes and props in *The Importance of Being Earnest* is meaningless unless the historical period is taken into consideration. It offers a valuable opportunity to introduce the adjective which perfectly describes the period – “fin de siècle”. A visual presentation of costumes and interior decoration typical of the period could be used to introduce the word because it is highly likely that students will encounter it in professional literature.

Speaking of the importance of geographical locations, the play by Tennessee Williams *A Streetcar Named Desire* is a case in point. It seems beneficial to provide students with additional information about this part of the United States because “New Orleans isn't like other cities” (Williams, 1980, p. 12). The design of the “two-story corner building” (Williams, 1980, p. 3) which is the main element of the stage set should probably be derived from the French heritage preserved in the symbols and architecture of New Orleans and the state of Louisiana. Becoming familiar with the local history embedded in emblems such as the fleur-de-lis (the stylised lily used as a symbol of the French crown), the story of the Louisiana Purchase (the vast French territory purchased by the United States in 1803), the colourful celebration known as Mardi Gras (the final day of the carnival season celebrated in New Orleans, France and some other countries) or the system of laws called the Napoleonic code (the French civil code whose revised form is still in force in the state of Louisiana) will help students make informed choices when trying to portray the given geographic location. But the most valuable insight will be provided by the visual identity of the French Quarter with its colourful buildings, “quaintly ornamented gables” (Williams, 1980, p. 3) and “rickety outside stairs and galleries” (Williams, 1980, p. 3). After all, that is the neighbourhood of New Orleans in which the action takes place. A short lecture accompanied by visual aids could be used to introduce the unique historical and geographical identity of New Orleans. For example, excerpts from the film *Jazz* by Ken Burns could offer relevant visual information and help put the new notions into context.

3.4. Vocabulary

“Vocabulary is one of the most obvious components of specialized English” (Basturkmen, 2025, p. 26) and these plays contain a significant number of vocabulary items that students should understand and acquire in order to create adequate stage sets, costumes and props. But being able to define a vocabulary item is not enough. Students of stage, costume and puppet design have to become familiar with the visual dimension of their specialised vocabulary. Therefore, definitions should always be accompanied by images. Great sources of visual aids are film adaptations of these plays. They also provoke class discussions during which students can analyse and evaluate the given visual solutions using the newly acquired vocabulary. Another activity that could facilitate the acquisition of new words involves an imaginary low-budget production of one of these plays. Keeping in mind the limited budget, students have to decide and explain which materials and techniques they would use in order to create the items described by the new vocabulary.

In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Algernon’s manservant Lane prepares “cucumber sandwiches” (Wilde, 1997, p. 667) for Lady Bracknell but before she arrives, Algernon succumbs to temptation and eats them all. By eating cucumber sandwiches on stage, the actor playing Algernon is, in fact, using props and students have to know what these sandwiches look like and how to make them. During the Victorian age, cucumber sandwiches were closely associated with the upper classes, symbolising their sedentary lifestyle and extravagance. Their appearance and ingredients reflected that fact. The recipe for cucumber sandwiches can be another interesting topic of discussion as students learn how to create these expendable props.

Some other vocabulary items worth focusing on include:

- **Props and costumes:**
 - *buttonhole* - a flower decorating a coat or jacket
 - *parasol* - a type of umbrella providing protection from the sun, but also used as a fashion accessory
 - *lorgnette* - a pair of glasses with a handle
 - *salver* - a tray used for serving food, drinks or letters
 - *knickerbockers* - an old-fashioned type of short and loose trousers that are fastened just below the knee
 - *pince-nez* - a pair of glasses held on the nose by a spring
- **Stage sets and theatre halls:**
 - *dormer window* - a covered structure on a sloping roof
 - *apron* - the area of the stage in front of the curtain
 - *portiere* - a doorway curtain
 - *proscenium* - the arch which separates the stage from the audience
 - *trellis* - a frame providing support to climbing plants.

4. CONCLUSION

The design of the ESP course for students of stage, costume and puppet design at the Academy of Arts and Culture in Osijek originates from the collaboration with the teacher who specialises in the history and theory of stage and costume design. Students have been highly motivated to acquire the knowledge offered and participate in class discussions. By studying the above-mentioned plays in great detail and in their original language, students are well prepared for the historical and theoretical analyses provided by the complementary course. However, there is still room for improvement. A study of how to improve and implement this type of collaboration within the wider context of the arts should be undertaken.

Also, a systematic evaluation of the proposed class activities and their learning outcomes is necessary. Due to the low number of enrolled students, it would have to be a long-term survey in order to obtain conclusive results. Additional research into the domain-specific methodology could provide effective new activities and insights that would have broader pedagogical implications.

Further collaboration with puppet designers would be beneficial in order to include puppet design and technology in the ESP course. Although the production of stage sets, costumes and props for puppet shows follows a similar process similar to the one already discussed, the design of puppets is an important aspect of students' future profession and should not be omitted.

Finally, the creation of a comprehensive glossary containing vocabulary used by stage, costume and puppet designers would greatly enhance the relevance of this ESP course.

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Suggested film adaptations

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ISPITIVANJE MOGUĆNOSTI NASTAVE ENGLESKOGA JEZIKA STRUKE ZA STUDENTE SCENOGRAFIJE, KOSTIMOGRAFIJE I LUTKARSKE TEHNOLOGIJE

Odsjek za kreativne tehnologije Akademije za umjetnost i kulturu u Osijeku nudi jedinstveni prijediplomski studij „Dizajn za kazalište, film i televiziju“. Cilj ovoga rada je istražiti mogućnosti nastave engleskoga jezika za studente scenografije, kostimografije i lutkarske tehnologije, oslanjajući se na suradnju s nastavnicom koja podučava obavezan kolegij „Povijest i teorija scenografije i kostimografije“. Zajednički cilj je analizirati određene dramske tekstove, pridajući posebnu pozornost opisima scenografije, kostima i rekvizita te potičući vizualnu kreativnost studenata. Ova vrsta suradnje dodatno motivira studente jer su svjesni da analizom određenih dramskih tekstova na izvornome jeziku (engleskome jeziku) stječu korisno znanje primjenjivo u nastavi drugoga kolegija. Pažljivo analizirajući dramske tekstove, studenti obogaćuju vokabular struke te uče o britanskoj i američkoj kulturi. Upoznaju se s različitim povijesnim i zemljopisnim okruženjima koja su ključna u izradi scenografije, rekvizita i kostima. Takve analize potiču razgovor na engleskome jeziku i ohrabruju studente na razmjenu ideja o kreativnome potencijalu scenografije i kostimografije u tim dramskim tekstovima. Ova vrsta vježbe je iznimno vrijedna s obzirom na to da njihova buduća struka često podrazumijeva višejezičnu i multikulturalnu suradnju. Uz teoretsku raspravu o prednostima ovoga pristupa, rad nudi mnogo korisnih primjera kako analizirati sljedeće dramske tekstove koristeći se opisima scene i kostima: „Važno je zvati se Ernest“ (Oscar Wilde), „Smrt trgovačkog putnika“ (Arthur Miller), „Tramvaj zvan žudnja“ (Tennessee Williams) i „Naš grad“ (Thornton Wilder).

Ključne riječi: analiza dramskog teksta, engleski jezik struke, kostimografija/ scenografija, primjeri, suradnja