ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES (ESP): CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: *The intent of this article is to provide the ESP course designer and materials provider with theoretical support. The paper refers first to origins and some key notions about ESP.*

Its premise is based on David Nunan's observations about the ESP teacher who needs the time, the skills and the support to develop ESP curriculum. (Nunan, 1987, p. 75). The personal experience is valued for helping teachers to face the task of developing ESP curricula.

Keywords: *ESP origins, ESP Characteristics, ESP curriculum, ESP material development.*

The Origins of ESP

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) note that two key historical moments breathed life into the evolution of ESP domain of teaching: the Second World War which brought with it an "... age of enormous and unprecedented expansion in scientific, technical and economic activity on an international scale" and made the United States the most important economic and political power. (p. 6). The Oil Crisis of the early 1970s resulted in Western money and know-how policy flowing into the oil-rich countries. The language of these two knowledge times became English.

The effect of all this development exerted a high pressure on the language teaching profession as English became subject to the wishes, needs and demands of people. (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p.7).

The second key reason having a tremendous impact on the emergence of ESP was a revolution in linguistics. Revolutionary pioneers in linguistics switched the focus of the science of linguistics from the description of the language features to the ways in which language is used in real communication. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) make reference to the discovery of the ways English vary in its spoken and written form. In other words, given the particular context in which English is used, the

variant of English will change. This discovery of the language variation in different context led to the idea of making the language instruction meet the needs of learners in specific contexts. Hence, in the late 1960s and the early 1970s English for Science and Technology (EST) was first described by pioneers as Ewer and Latorre, Swales, and Selinker. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) make reference to their contribution.

The final reason Hutchinson and Waters (1987) cite as having influenced the emergence of ESP was the focus on the learners' needs and the ways the specific language is acquired. Learners employ different learning strategies, use different skills, and learning schemata, and are motivated differently by needs and interests. Hence, the natural extension was the development of specific courses to better meet individual needs giving birth to the catchword of *learner-centered* or *learning-centered* approach.

Absolute and Variable Characteristics of ESP

Theorists like Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) brought in their own definition of ESP. Strevens (1988) identified its absolute and variable characteristics making distinction between four absolute and two variable characteristics:

I. Absolute characteristics:
▪ meets specified needs of the learner;
▪ content centred on particular subjects, professions and social activities;
▪ centred on that language which is appropriate to those activities in syntax, lexis, discourse, semantics, etc., and analysis of this discourse;
▪ contrasting with General English
II. Variable characteristics:
ESP may be
• restricted as to the language skills to be learned (e.g. reading only);
• not taught according to any pre-ordained methodology (pp.1-2).

There has been considerable recent debate about the meaning of ESP despite the fact that it is an approach which has been widely used over the last three decades. In 1997 Dudley-Evans postulates his own definition with the following different.

I. Absolute Characteristics
- ESP is tailored to meet specific needs of the learner;
- ESP makes use of the underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves;
- ESP is centred on the language (grammar, lexis, register), skills, discourse and genres appropriate to these activities

He also developed some more

II. Variable Characteristics
- ESP may be related to or designed for specific disciplines;
- ESP may use a different methodology from that of general English;
- ESP is likely to be designed for adult learners, either at a tertiary level institution or in a professional work situation. It could, however, be for learners at secondary school level;
- ESP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students;
- Most ESP courses assume some basic knowledge of the language system, but it can be used with beginners (1998, pp. 4-5).

Dudley-Evans and St. John have removed the absolute characteristic that 'ESP is in contrast with General English' and assert that ESP is not necessarily related to a specific discipline. According to them, ESP is likely to be used with adult learners although it could be used in a secondary school setting.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) promote a broader definition of ESP as an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner's reason for learning" (p. 19). Ten years later, Anthony notes that it is not clear where ESP courses end and general English courses begin: general language instruction makes use of the ESP approach in that its syllabus is based on learner needs analysis for real communication.

Types of ESP

David Carver (1983) identifies three types of ESP:
1. English as a restricted language
2. English for Academic and Occupational Purposes
3. English with specific topics

Mackay and Mountford (1978) clearly illustrate the difference between restricted language and language in the following statement:

... the language of international air-traffic control could be regarded as 'special', in the sense that the repertoire required by the controller is strictly limited and can be accurately determined situationally, as might be the linguistic needs of a dining-room waiter or air-hostess. However, such

restricted repertoires are not languages, just as a tourist phrase book is not grammar. The ability of using a restricted 'language' would not allow its speaker to communicate effectively in a novel situation, or in contexts outside the vocational environment (pp. 4-5).

English for Academic and Occupational Purposes is the second type of ESP identified by Carter (1983). In the 'Tree of ELT' (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987), ESP is broken down into three branches:

a) English for Science and Technology (EST),

b) English for Business and Economics (EBE), and

c) English for Social Studies (ESS).

Each of these subject areas is further divided into two branches:

- English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and
- English for Occupational Purposes (EOP)

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) note that there is not a clear-cut distinction between EAP and EOP: "people can work and study simultaneously; it is also likely that in many cases the language learnt for immediate use in a study environment will be used later when the student takes up, or returns to, a job" (p. 16).

The third and final type of ESP identified by Carver (1983) is English with specific topics emphasizing the shift from purpose to topic for the first time. This type of ESP is uniquely concerned with professionals requiring English for postgraduate reading studies, attending conferences or working in foreign institutions. In my opinion, this is not a separate type of ESP, but a component of which focuses on situational language.

Characteristics of ESP Courses

The three characteristics of ESP course identified by Carver (1983) are

a) the authenticity of the course contents,

b) the purpose-related orientation, and

c) self-direction

Dudley-Evans' (1997) claims that ESP should be associated with the intermediate or advanced level of the learners, which makes the use of the authentic learning materials feasible. This is indeed a feature of ESP, particularly in self-directed study and research tasks.

The experience that I had at the Christian university Dimitrie Cantemir as a curriculum developer was based on an independent study assignment in which I was required to investigate and manage a specific English course for the professional area of public relations. The students themselves were also encouraged to conduct research for the development of their own course using a variety of resources, including the Internet. The self-direction

characteristic of ESP courses is that the "ESP is concerned with turning learners into users" (Carver, 1983, p. 134). In order for self-direction to occur, the students in public relations were encouraged to a certain degree of freedom to decide when, what, and how they would study. Carter (1983) also adds that a systematic attempt by teachers should occur when teaching the learners how to learn. In my opinion it is still necessary for the Romanian high-ability students to be taught about learning strategies and about how to access information when they need.

Key Issues in ESP Curriculum Design

In this section, key issues in ESP curriculum design are examined. The issues explored here are a product of my professional experience of developing the curriculum for English for Public relation Job. This experience has been supported by the literature on ESP.

Abilities Required for Successful Communication in Occupational Settings

Cummins (1979) theorized the dichotomy between basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). The former refers to the language skills used in the everyday informal language used with friends, family and co-workers. The latter refers to a language proficiency required to make sense of and use academic language. Situations in which individuals use BICS are characterized by contexts that provide relatively easy access to meaning. However, CALP use occurs in contexts that offer fewer contextual clues.

After having developed and taught the curriculum for English for Public relation Job, I have reached the conclusion that there are three abilities necessary for successful communication in a professional target setting and I have added a third skill or ability to Cummins' theory in order to complete the ESP picture.

The first ability required in order to successfully communicate in an occupational setting is the ability to use the particular jargon characteristic of that specific occupational context. The second is the ability to use a more generalized set of academic skills, such as conducting research and responding to memoranda. With the public relation job this was largely related to understanding a new culture. The third is the ability to use the language of everyday informal talk to communicate effectively, regardless of occupational context. Examples of this include chatting over coffee with a colleague or responding to an informal email message. The task for the

ESP developer is to ensure that all three of these abilities are integrated in the curriculum.

In the case of English for Public relation Job there were many possible potential occupational settings to research and I opted to identify academic skills that were transferable to most public relation jobs. This required an inventory of possible public relation jobs and the identification of the academic specific language skills needed. All of this information was then cross-referenced with the general language objectives for the identified group of learners.

It is my opinion, the developer of an ESP curriculum requires the instructional experience to perform a comprehensive research on needs analysis to identify the perfect balance of the abilities noted above for any particular group of learners.

Content Language Acquisition versus General Language Acquisition

The needs analysis and the management needs of the curriculum made the balance shift on the content-knowledge lectures to be delivered weekly. The English course syllabus was broken down into 28 classical content lectures and 14 seminars which were distributed on two semesters of the first academic year. It was determined that more time need be allotted for pure content lectures and extra-curriculum time needed to be for team-taught activities.

The first thing that is apparent from this breakdown, is that time devoted to content-based lectures far outweighed the time devoted to the acquisition of general and specific language and academic skills. However, the need for the development of content knowledge, academic proficiency and general language was interwoven with team activities.

The learners indicated that they desired the opportunity to interact with their instructor in the seminar in addition to attending the old-style lecture format. The students were highly motivated to attend the content lectures and yet additional support from the English for Special Purposes instructor was required in the seminar because, in order to meet the learners' needs, we could not teach the restricted professional repertoire in isolation.

Most of the students could recognize specific meaning, but not produce it. It was determined that more time should be allotted for seminar work on communication science terminology. Moreover, much more time would be also spent on communication for the workplace; in this way, they students would be afforded ample opportunity to integrate and practice the restricted repertoire acquired in content lectures.

Structure of the students groups

There are a number of variables which characterize a heterogeneous learner group. I argue that variations in language level, prior education and work experience can be accommodated only to a certain extent. Minimum entrance standards must be established in the areas of language level, motivation, and prior education and experience. Most importantly, these standards must be strictly enforced at the time of placement.

Due to the limited time frame for the development of the public relation science English syllabus the minimum general language entrance requirement was dropped from high to low intermediate in order to generate a large enough pool of suitable students to make the programme effective. 20 of them were high intermediate and 60 of them were low intermediate. Based on observations of a four-week English for Business course, Yogman and Kaylani (1996) conclude that there appears to be a minimum proficiency level that is required for students to participate in predominately content-related activities. This supports my finding that the rest of 40 students who were struggling to catch up with general language proficiency simply found the content activities to be overwhelming. They were separated into two different groups to make their language acquisition easier. The advanced students were encouraged to record as much detail as possible, carry out supplemental reading that pertained to the lecture topics and to assist their peers whenever possible.

In the seminar activity the students were called for conference debate simulations, involving the preparation of papers, reading, note taking, and writing. They were also involved in the design and presentation of a unique business venture, including market research, pamphlets and logo creation. The students had their oral presentation in a poster presentation session. They also handed in their written business plan as a result of their research in public relation domain.

Materials Development

Johns comments that no ESP text can live up to its name. "ESP teachers find themselves in a situation where they are expected to produce a course that matches the needs of a group of learners, but are expected to do so with no, or very limited, preparation time" (Johns, 1990, p. 91).

Many ESP developers are not provided with time for needs analysis, materials research and development although there are many texts which claim to meet the standards of ESP courses. He suggests that the only real solution is that a resource bank of pooled materials be made available to

all ESP instructors (Johns, 1990). This is not available for our educational setting yet. As a newly appointed dean of the faculty of foreign languages, this one is among my major targets for the near future. This will include cross-indexed doable, workable content-based resources, as familiarizing oneself with useful instructional materials is part of growing as a teacher, regardless of the nature of purpose for learning.

As for my own experience with the English for Public relations course the curricular materials were unavoidably pieced together, some were borrowed and others were designed specially. Resources included authentic materials, ESL materials, ESP materials, and teacher-generated materials.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the origins of ESP, addressed key notions about ESP and examined issues in ESP curriculum design. The content of the paper was determined by a need identified based on my professional experience as an ESL instructor designing and delivering the content-based language program - Language Preparation for Employment in the Public relations jobs. These issues, where possible, have been supported by current and pertinent academic literature. I hope that these observations will lend insight into the challenges facing the ESL instructor acting as ESP curriculum developer.

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