English for Specific Purposes: An Imperative Need in our Curriculum

K Jagan Mohan Rao

ABSTRACT

This paper delineates the emerging importance of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in the modern competitive world of teaching and learning. The existing principles and practices need a major change owing to the increasing needs of students and their areas of specialisation. It also discusses the origin of ESP and the practical approach to achieving success in the classroom, leading to employability of learners. It includes various learning strategies, roles, and responsibilities of the teacher and learner during the learning process. If the curriculum has to be more useful and goal-oriented, for the benefit of future and working professionals, and make them more effective and efficient in their fields of choice, we need to give serious thought to ESP. Though our universities are doing their best to make students employable and market-ready professionals, surveys reveal that only 13% of graduates are employable. The rest are unable to get through the recruitment process due to the lack of language skills required in the workplace. ESP is communicative and learner-centric in nature, where teacher and learner are equally engaged towards achieving mutual objectives. To succeed in teaching ESP, one has to employ content-based instruction and task-based language teaching effectively.

Keywords: ESP; Content-Based Instruction; Task-Based ELT; Employability; Industry-Ready Professionals.

Introduction

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is a learner-centred approach to teaching English as a foreign or second language. It meets the needs of adult learners who need to learn a foreign language for use in their specific fields. This course is recommended for students from high school to university levels; foreign and second language professionals who wish to learn how to design ESP courses and programmes in an area of specialisation; engineering and technology; academic purposes; and health service purposes. It involves instructional strategies, materials adaptation and development, and evaluation.

The Origin of ESP

"Certainly, a great deal about the origins of ESP could be written. Notably, there are three reasons common to the emergence of all ESP: the demands of a Brave New World, a revolution in linguistics, and focus on the learner" (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).

According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), there are two key historical periods that breathed life into ESP. First, the end of the Second World War brought with it an "... age

of enormous and unprecedented expansion in scientific, technical and economic activity on an international scale for various reasons, most notably the economic power of the United States in the post-war world, the role [of international language] fell to English" (p. 6).

Second, the oil crisis of the early 1970s resulted in Western money and knowledge flowing into the oil-rich countries. This knowledge was in English, leading to the origin of English for Specific Purposes.

Another reason Hutchinson and Waters (1987) cite as having influenced the emergence of ESP has less to do with linguistics and everything to do with psychology. Rather than focus on the method of language delivery, more attention is given to the ways in which learners acquire language and the differences in the ways language is acquired. Learners employ different learning strategies, use different skills, enter with different learning schemata, and are motivated by different needs and interests. Therefore, focus on the learners' needs is important. Designing courses to meet these individual needs is essential.

ESP is:

- designed to meet specific needs of the learners;

- related in content (i.e. in its themes and topics) to particular disciplines, occupations, and activities;

- centred on the language appropriate to those activities, in syntax, lexis, discourse, and semantics, and analysis of this discourse;

- a contrast to general English;

- used to develop an understanding of the factors leading to its emergence, and the forces, both theoretical and applied, that have shaped its subsequent development;

- used to assist students in preparing a syllabus and develop needs assessments and genre analyses for specific groups of learners;

- used to provide guidelines to adapt or create authentic materials in a chosen professional or occupational area, and to critically evaluate currently available materials, including technology-based ones; and

- used to become knowledgeable about assessment procedures and apply this knowledge in developing course and lesson evaluation plans in specific professional areas.

ESP concentrates more on language in context than on teaching grammar and language structures. It covers varying subjects. The ESP focal point is that English is not taught as a subject separated from the students' real world; instead, it is integrated into a subject-matter area important to the learners. Teaching ESP becomes easier for those who have handled content-based instruction and task-based language teaching, as it is a blend of both methods.

ESP combines subject-matter and English language teaching. This is highly motivating because students are able to apply what they learn in their English classes to their main field of study. Being able to use the vocabulary and structures that they learn in a

meaningful context reinforces what is taught and motivates them. The students' ability in their fields, in turn, improves their ability to acquire English. Subject knowledge gives them the context they need to understand English.

The term "specific" in ESP refers to the specific purpose for learning English. Students approach the study of English through a field that is already known and relevant to them. The ESP approach enhances the relevance of what the students are learning and enables them to use the English they know to learn even more, since their interest in their field will motivate them to interact with speakers and texts. ESP assesses needs and integrates motivation, subject matter, and content for the teaching of relevant skills.

Responsibility of the Teacher

A teacher who already has experience in teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) can excel in language teaching. The teacher should recognise ways in which their teaching skills can be adapted for the teaching of ESP. They need to look for content specialists for help in designing appropriate lessons in the subject-matter. This helps them learn new things in a collaborative manner, ultimately helping the learners and themselves. They can understand the subject teachers' difficulties and can advise them on how to handle challenges in the classroom.

ESP teachers must play many roles as they may be asked to organise courses, to set learning objectives, establish a positive learning environment in the classroom, and evaluate students' progress. They have to be innovative and flexible while handling these classes, besides being proactive and ready to face new and unpredictable challenges. They have to learn the practical aspects of what they are going to teach in an ESP class.

Organising Courses

The teacher has to set learning goals and transform them into an instructional programme with time-bound activities. One of the main tasks will be selecting, designing, and organising course materials, supporting the students in their efforts, and providing feedback.

Setting Goals and Objectives

Setting long-term goals and short-term objectives is recommended. Knowledge of students' background is central in designing a syllabus with realistic goals.

Creating a Learning Environment

The teacher's communication and mediation skills make the atmosphere conducive for learning. Students acquire language when they have an opportunity to use it while interacting with other speakers. The teacher may be the only English-speaking person available to the students. So, immediate and effective feedback is mandatory for progress and accomplishment of desired objectives. Good language learners are great risk-takers, since they must make many errors in order to succeed. However, in ESP classes, they are handicapped because they are unable to use their native language competence to present themselves as well-informed adults. The teacher has the responsibility to help build the learner's confidence. There is a downside with regard to the use of ESP

among learners, as they think explaining content is more important than proper sentence formation. This results in neglecting the learning of English by most professionals. So the teachers should focus on both language and content so that the learners can become global professionals in future.

Evaluating Students

The teacher is a resource, who helps students identify their problems and find solutions; the teacher is one who finds out the skills the students need to focus on, and takes responsibility for making choices which determine what and how to learn. The teacher serves as a source of information. Evaluation is mostly done by asking students to demonstrate the process involved in the use of devices and the working nature of the devices or products, either orally or in written form.

Responsibility of the Students

The learners are in charge of developing English language skills to reflect their native-language knowledge. They need to be adaptable, as it is challenging to overcome their mother-tongue influence and find technical jargon to suit their requirements.

Interest and Need for Learning

People learn languages when they have opportunities to understand and work with language in a context that they comprehend, find useful, and interesting. ESP is a powerful tool for such opportunities. Students will acquire English as they work with materials they find interesting and relevant, and which they can use in their professional work. The more learners pay attention to the meaning of the language, the more they are successful; the more they have to focus on the linguistic input or language structures, the less they are motivated.

The ESP student is particularly well-disposed to focus on meaning in the subject-matter. In ESP, English should be presented, not as a subject to be learned in isolation, nor as a mechanical skill or habit to be developed. On the contrary, English should be presented in authentic contexts to acquaint the learners with the ways in which the language is used in functions that they will need to perform in their fields of specialisation or at the workplace.

Subject-Content Knowledge

Learners have oriented their education towards a specific field. So, they see English training as complementing this orientation. Knowledge of the subject area enables the students to identify vocabulary and structures. The learners can take advantage of what they already know about the subject-matter to learn English.

Learning Strategies

Adults must work harder than children to learn a new language, but their learning skills permit them to learn faster and more efficiently. The skills they have already developed in using their native language will make learning English easier. They can expand their vocabulary, becoming more fluent in their fields and adjusting their linguistic behaviour to new situations.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) consider learners as 'feeling' beings. When new knowledge comes in the form of input with

familiar language elements and topics, learners perceive learning to be easier.

The first category envelops the contents of the course. When focused on general topics, the learners are more interested in the lessons, leading to motivation. Moreover, general English improvement could fill the gap in sub-technical English, because "scientific English, for example, uses the same structures as any other kind of English but with a different distribution" (Kennedy and Bolitho 1984: p.19). As a result, at the sub-technical level, learners could easily deal with sub-technical content with the help of general English knowledge, because in technical English, as Robinson (1991) points out, many common core language words are used for technical purposes.

The second category is to bridge the gap between general and technical English. Speaking and writing courses are organised from general to the specific. For example, in the speaking class, topics can be dealt with in three stages. In the first stage, general topics, such as personal details, weather, traffic problems, and storytelling, are involved. The second stage covers general technical topics, such as talking about buildings, advantages and disadvantages of the use of mobile phones, and so on. The topic selection in the third stage has to be relevant to the participants' work since it includes technical jargon. The participants will now feel comfortable, since productive skills are acquired gradually, from simple to the complex and from general to the specific.

Johns (1998: pp.183-197) states the importance of visual presentations in ESP to include graphs, charts, maps, technical drawing, plans, and so on, because professionals read visual-related literature frequently during their study. The visual information includes language input as well as content input, so it can be transferred to verbal information or vice versa. Students are interested in utilising this language feature. They try to express themselves by means of visuals, thus promoting their language learning. At the end of the programme, all learners will feel confident in using English related to their field of study, as well as general English.

Materials to Adopt

This is the central question Johns (1990) addresses. One of the core dilemmas he presents is that "ESP teachers find themselves in a situation where they are expected to produce a course that exactly 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).

In the real world, many ESL instructors/ESP developers are not provided with ample time for needs analysis, materials research, and materials development. Johns (1990) comments that no one ESP text can live up to its name. He suggests that the only real solution is that a bank of materials be made available to all ESP instructors (Johns, 1990).

Every teacher has to become a researcher, studying the useful instructional materials. Given that ESP is an approach and not a subject to be taught, curricular materials will unavoidably be pieced together, some borrowed and others designed specially. Resources include authentic materials, ESL materials, ESP materials, and teacher-generated materials.

Conclusion

Teaching and learning in the ESP context is challenging for both the teacher and the learner as it is highly flexible in terms of needs analysis, choice of texts or materials. Both the teacher and the learner can exercise freedom during the process, thus creating confidence, leading to an enjoyable yet engaging teaching–learning activity, while using audio-visual equipment wherever necessary. ESP creates employment opportunities for teachers and individuals with expertise in various subjects. Content writers and technical writers are highly paid professionals these days and English teachers deserve these positions if they have experience in teaching ESP.

References

Anthony, L. (1997). ESP: What does it mean? ON CUE. http://interserver.miyazaki-med.ac.jp/~cue/pc/anthony.html.

Chen, Y. (2005). Designing an ESP Program for Multi-Disciplinary Technical Learners. *ESP World, Volume 4, Issue 2 (November 2005).* http://www.esp-world.info/articles_10/issue_10.html.

Dudley-Evans, T., and St John, M. (1998). *Developments in ESP: A multi-disciplinary approach.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gatehouse, K. (2001). Key Issues in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) Curriculum Development. *The Internet TESL Journal,* Vol. VII, No. 10. http://iteslj.org/.

Holliday, A (1995). Assessing language needs within an institutional context: An ethnographic approach. *English for Specific Purposes,* 14.

Holme, R. (1996). *ESP ideas.* London: Longman.

Hutchinson, T. and A. Waters (1987). *English for specific purposes: A learning-centred approach.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Johns, A. M. (1998). The visual and the verbal: A case study in macroeconomics. *English for Specific Purposes,* 17, pp.183-197.

Kennedy, C. and R. Bolitho (1984). *English for Specific Purposes.* London: Macmillan.

Puzyo, I. G. and S. Val (1996). The Construction of Technicality in the Field of Plastics: A Functional Approach Towards Teaching Technical Terminology. *English for Specific Purposes,*15, pp.251-278.

Robinson, P. (1991). *ESP today: A practitioner's guide.* Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall.

Stapp, Y. F. (1998). Instructor-Employer Collaboration: A Model for Technical Workplace English. *English for Specific Purposes,* 17, pp.169-182.

Strevens, P. (1988). ESP after twenty years: A re-appraisal. In M. Tickoo (Ed.), *ESP: State of the Art,* pp. 1-13. Singapore: SEAMEO Regional Centre.

Trimble, L. (1985). *EST: A discourse approach.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Xenodohidis, T. H. (2002). An ESP

Curriculum for Greek EFL Students of Computing: A New Approach. *ESP World,* Vol. 1, Issue 2, Vol. 1. http://www.esp-world.info/index.html.

Yogman, J. and C. T. Kaylani (1996). ESP Program Design for Mixed Level Students. *English for Specific Purposes,* 15, pp.311-324.

Dr. K. Jagan Mohan Rao, Asst. Professor of English, Shaqra University, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Email: jmohan@su.edu.sa

Some useful web tools for speaking skills

Podcasting Tools

Podomatic (http://www.podomatic.com)

Spreaker (http://www.spreaker.com)

Audioboom (https://audioboom.com)

A podcast is an audio broadcast over the web. It is broken up into parts or episodes. Most podcasts are similar to news radio programs and deliver information on a regular basis, but they can also be comedy shows, special music broadcasts or talks. You as a teacher can set up a podcasting channel in Podomatic, Spreaker, or Audioboom.

[***Contributed by Dr. Xavier Pradeep Singh***, Dept of English, St Joseph's College, Trichy]

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Members of ELTAI who read the contributions to the journal are free to give their views on the contents of the articles/papers published here. The letters should reach ELTAI (eltai_india@yahoo.co.in or indiaeltai@gmail.com) within a month from the date of receipt of the journal.