

Defining English for Specific Purposes and the Role of the ESP Practitioner

Laurence Anthony

Dept. of Information and Computer Engineering, Faculty of Engineering, Okayama University of Science, 1-1 Ridai-cho, Okayama 700-0005, Japan

Abstract

This paper first defines the 'English for Specific Purposes' (ESP) approach to language teaching in terms of absolute and variable characteristics offered by Dudley-Evans in the plenary speech of the first Japan Conference on English for Specific Purposes. Then, under the headings of teacher, collaborator, course designer and materials provider, researcher, and evaluator proposed by Dudley-Evans, a comparison is made between the 'General English' teacher and the so-called ESP practitioner.

1. *Growth of ESP*

From the early 1960's, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has grown to become one of the most prominent areas of EFL teaching today. Its development is reflected in the increasing number of universities offering an MA in ESP (e.g. The University of Birmingham, and Aston University in the UK) and in the number of ESP courses offered for overseas students in English speaking countries. There is now a well-established international journal dedicated to ESP discussion, "English for Specific Purposes: An international journal", and the ESP SIG groups of the IATEFL and TESOL are active at their national conferences.

In Japan too, the ESP movement has shown a slow but definite growth over the past few years. In particular, increased interest has been spurred by the Ministry of Education's decision in 1994 to largely hand over control of university curriculums to the universities themselves. This has led to a rapid growth in English courses aimed at specific disciplines, e.g. 'English for Chemists', in place of the more traditional 'General English' courses. The ESP community in Japan has also become more defined, with the Japan Association of College English Teachers (JACET) ESP SIG set up in 1996 and the Japan Association of Language Teachers (JALT) N-SIG to be formed shortly. Finally, in November 1997, the ESP community came together as a whole at the first Japan Conference on English for Specific Purposes held at Aizu University in Fukushima Prefecture.

2. *The ESP approach*

As described above, ESP has had a relatively long time to mature and so we would expect the ESP community to have a clear idea about what ESP means. Strangely, however, this does not seem to be the case. In October of 1997, for example, a heated debate took place on the TESP-L e-mail discussion list about whether or not English for Academic Purposes (EAP) could be considered part

of ESP in general. At the Japan Conference on ESP also, clear differences in how people interpreted the meaning of ESP could be seen. Some described ESP as simply being the teaching of English for any purpose that could be specified. Others, however, were more precise describing it as the teaching of English used in academic studies, or the teaching of English for vocational or professional purposes.

The main speaker at the Japan Conference on ESP, Tony Dudley-Evans, is very aware of the current confusion amongst the ESP community, and set out in his one hour speech to clarify the meaning of ESP, giving an extended definition in terms of 'absolute' and 'variable' characteristics (see below).

Definition of ESP (Dudley-Evans, 1997)

Absolute Characteristics

1. ESP is defined to meet specific needs of the learners
2. ESP makes use of underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves
3. ESP is centered on the language appropriate to these activities in terms of grammar, lexis, register, study skills, discourse and genre.

Variable Characteristics

1. ESP may be related to or designed for specific disciplines
2. ESP may use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of General English
3. 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
4. ESP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students.
5. Most ESP courses assume some basic knowledge of the language systems

The definition Dudley-Evans offers is clearly influenced by that of Strevens (1988), although he has improved it substantially by removing the absolute characteristic that ESP is "in contrast with 'General English'" (Johns et al., 1991: 298), and has revised and increased the number of variable characteristics. The division of ESP into absolute and variable characteristics, in particular, is very helpful in resolving arguments about what is and is not ESP. From the definition, we can see that ESP can but is not necessarily concerned with a specific discipline, nor does it have to be aimed at a certain age group or ability range. ESP should be seen simple as an 'approach' to teaching, or what Dudley-Evans describes as an 'attitude of mind'. Such a view echoes that of Hutchinson et al. (1987:19) who state, "ESP is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner's reason for learning".

3. *The ESP Practitioner*

If we agree with the above definition, we begin to see how broad ESP really is. In fact, one may ask 'What is the difference between the ESP and 'General English' approach?' Hutchinson et al. (1987:53) answer this quite simply, "in theory nothing, in practise a great deal". In 1987, of course, the last statement was quite true. At the time, teachers of 'General English' courses, while acknowledging that students had a specific purpose for studying English, would rarely conduct a needs analysis to find out what was necessary to actually achieve it. Teachers nowadays, however, are much more aware of the importance of needs analysis, and published textbooks have improved dramatically allowing the teacher to select materials which closely match the goals of the learner. Perhaps this demonstrates the influence that the ESP approach has had on English teaching in general. Nevertheless, the line between where 'General English' courses stop and ESP courses start has become very vague indeed.

Ironically, although many 'General English' teachers can be described as using an ESP approach, basing their syllabi on a learner needs analysis and their own specialist knowledge of using English for real communication, many so-called ESP teachers are using an approach furthest from that described above. Coming from a background unrelated to the discipline in which they are asked to teach, ESP teachers are usually unable to rely on personal experiences when evaluating materials and considering course goals. At the university level in particular, they are also unable to rely on the views of the learners, who tend not to know what English abilities are required by the profession they hope to enter. The result is that many ESP teachers become slaves to the published textbooks available, and worse, when there are no textbooks available for a particular discipline, resolve to teaching from textbooks which may be quite unsuitable.

Dudley Evans describes the true ESP teacher or ESP Practitioner (Swales, 1988) as needing to perform five different roles. These are 1) Teacher, 2) Collaborator, 3) Course designer and materials provider, 4) Researcher and 5) Evaluator. The first role as 'teacher' is synonymous with that of the 'General English' teacher. It is in the performing of the other four roles that differences between the two emerge. In order to meet the specific needs of the learners and adopt the methodology and activities of the target discipline, the ESP Practitioner must first work closely with field specialists. One example of the important results that can emerge from such a collaboration is reported by Orr (1995). This collaboration, however, does not have to end at the development stage and can extend as far as teach teaching, a possibility discussed by Johns et al. (1988). When team teaching is not a possibility, the ESP Practitioner must collaborate more closely with the learners, who will generally be more familiar with the specialized content of materials than the teacher him or herself.

Both 'General English' teachers and ESP practitioners are often required to design courses and provide materials. One of the main controversies in the field of ESP is how specific those materials should be. Hutchinson et al. (1987:165) support materials that cover a wide range of fields, arguing that the grammatical structures, functions, discourse structures, skills, and strategies of different

disciplines are identical. More recent research, however, has shown this not to be the case. Hansen (1988), for example, describes clear differences between anthropology and sociology texts, and Anthony (1998) shows unique features of writing in the field of engineering. Unfortunately, with the exception of textbooks designed for major fields such as computer science and business studies, most tend to use topics from multiple disciplines, making much of the material redundant and perhaps even confusing the learner as to what is appropriate in the target field. Many ESP practitioners are therefore left with no alternative than to develop original materials. It is here that the ESP practitioner's role as 'researcher' is especially important, with results leading directly to appropriate materials for the classroom.

The final role as 'evaluator' is perhaps the role that ESP practitioners have neglected most to date. As Johns et al. (1991) describe, there have been few empirical studies that test the effectiveness of ESP courses. For example, the only evaluation of the non compulsory course reported by Hall et al. (1986:158) is that despite carrying no credits, "students continue to attend despite rival pressures of a heavy programme of credit courses". On the other hand, recent work such as that of Jenkins et al. (1993) suggests an increasing interest in this area of research.

4. Conclusion

If the ESP community hopes to grow, it is vital that the community as a whole understands what ESP actually represents, and can accept the various roles that ESP practitioners need to adopt to ensure its success. Only then, can new members join with confidence, and existing members carry on the practices which have brought ESP to the position that it has in EFL teaching today. In Japan, in particular, ESP is still in its infancy and so now is the ideal time to form such a consensus.

5. References

- Anthony, L. (1998). *Preaching to Cannibals: A Look at Academic Writing in Engineering*. Proceedings of the Japan Conference on English for Specific Purposes (forthcoming).
- Dudley-Evans, T. (1998). *Developments in English for Specific Purposes: A multi-disciplinary approach*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hall, D., Hawkey, R., Kenny B., & Storer G. (1986). Patterns of thought in scientific writing: A course in information structuring for engineering students. *English for Specific Purposes*, 5:147-160.
- Hansen, K. (1988). Rhetoric and epistemology in the social sciences: A contrast of two representative texts. In D. A. Joliffe (Ed.), *Writing in Academic Disciplines: Advances in Writing Research*. Norwood.
- Hutchinson, T. & Waters, A. (1987). *English for Specific Purposes: A learner-centered approach*. Cambridge University Press.
- Jenkins, S., Jordan, M. K., & Weiland, P. O. (1993). The role of writing in graduate engineering

education: A survey of faculty beliefs and practices. *English for Specific Purposes*, 12:51-67.

Johns, T. F. & Dudley-Evans, T. (1988). An experiment in team teaching overseas postgraduate students of transportation and plant biology. In J. Swales (Ed.), *Episodes in ESP*. Prentice Hall.

Johns, A. M. & Dudley-Evans, T. (1991). *English for Specific Purposes: International in Scope, Specific in Purpose*. *TESOL Quarterly* 25:2, 297-314.

Orr, T. (1995). *Models of Professional Writing Practices Within the Field of Computer Science*. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation. Ball State University.

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

Swales, J. (1988). *Episodes in ESP*. Prentice Hall.