

An immodest proposal for tertiary level EFL: An interview with Mike Guest

Keywords

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大学教育者SIGの年次大会が今年度は奈良県の帝塚山大学にて、10月17、18日に開かれる。この大会を盛り上げるために、会の主催者John Gunningが宮崎大学医学部准教授のMichael Guestにインタビューした。Guest氏はデイリー読売のEFLコラムニストでもある。両氏はESP/EAPの教授法に関する問題を議論した。

John Gunning

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Conference 2009

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LAST July, in the closing hours of the College and University Educators (CUE) Special Interest Group (SIG) annual conference held at Kinki University, the reins were passed and I somewhat reluctantly agreed to become this year's conference organizer. I say "reluctantly" only because I knew that I would be following on the overwhelming successes of the Kinki Conference and ones held in previous years. I was lucky in one respect – as CUE Coordinator Matt Apple and others were discussing this year's theme at lunch that Sunday, we unanimously decided on the theme for the 2009 CUE Conference: *ESP/EAP: English for Global Working, Living and Studying*. With this in mind and based on discussions I had with John Campbell-Larsen and Stuart Cunningham, who both chaired and organized a one-day conference on ESP at Himeji University in May 2008, I knew the CUE 2009 conference theme would generate interest among educators in Japan. Through casual conversations with other CUE members, I have come to the conclusion that many of us are involved with educational issues related to both English for General Purposes as well as courses that could be described as either being English for Specific Purposes (ESP) or English for Academic Purposes (EAP).

One of the first orders of business was to generate a short list of plenary speakers. Campbell and Cunningham mentioned Dr. Thomas Orr at the University of Aizu as a possible speaker. I contacted him and was thrilled that he agreed to speak. Matt Apple then mentioned and subsequently contacted a familiar name – Michael (Mike) Guest, an Associate Professor of English in the Medical Faculty at the University of Miyazaki and a regular columnist on EFL affairs for *The Daily Yomiuri* newspaper. After he agreed to attend our conference as one of the plenary speakers, I was fortunate enough to discuss some issues related to ESP/EAP with him.

John Gunning (JG): Mike, thanks for taking time with me today. I guess I should cut to the chase and get right into it then. ESP and EAP is such a growing area of language education in Japan, but it is often

quite misunderstood in general terms. What is the role of the ESP/EAP teacher in the current state of Japanese tertiary education?

Mike Guest (M.G.): *Is?* I doubt that there is a single *role* as such. But I do think that *all* tertiary English education in Japan *should* fall under the rubric of ESP/EAP. University education is supposed to be primarily academic in form, which means developing and using academic skills. It is *not* supposed to be a glorified conversation school, a hobby center, or a simple extension of standardized high school public education. And since tertiary education is expected to have a particular focus it seems to me that tertiary English education must therefore be *about* something. It should be content-based, well beyond teaching general *English for English's sake*, even though many courses may be outwardly designated as such. Unfortunately though, (unnecessary) titular designations between content classes and English classes often relegate these general English classes to a status that is very un-academic and un-focused. It can easily become something like an on-campus *Eikaiwa* school, a remedial high school course, or TOEIC prep – which should not be the function of any university course.

JG: Based on your reply and in my own experience, it seems that many universities do not have a very clear understanding of what ESP/EAP actually is and how it relates to the differences between general English classes. I am not a trained ESP teacher, but I do have training as an English teacher in general. With this in mind, what is the general consensus about the background of an ESP teacher? In other words, is it better to be experienced in that content area, or to be a well-trained/experienced English teacher in general?

MG: Actually, there doesn't even seem to be any consensus as to exactly what an ESP/EAP teacher is, what a general EFL teacher is, or even what is meant by terms like *content teacher*. After all, so-called regular EFL teachers may teach using content-based learning as a methodology – are they then content teachers? If a so-called general EFL teacher at a business vocational school uses business content English with specific language applications in mind, is that teacher still an EFL teacher? ESP/EAP? A content teacher? All of the above? The nomenclature is vague because the roles are vague; not that there is anything wrong with that. However, as long as the *E* is the first letter in the acronym, we can reasonably assume that any ESP/EAP teacher is still basically teaching English. A *real* content teacher in Japan would obviously be teaching in Japanese.

Anyway, the only definite experiential qualification is that the instructor be a well-trained *educator*, and not *just* a scholar or expert. That is, he or she should know, in training and experience, something about the processes of learning, how to manage classes, how to design lessons and curriculum, and how to evaluate, in general. Everything else is secondary.

As for the 'content' part of the question, my intuitive response is that all teachers at the tertiary level should be teaching content anyway, content that is cognitively engaging and connected to academic or professional discourse. If there is an emphasis upon *communication*, and not just conversation or exchanges, there must be some meaningful content that is being communicated. There shouldn't be much of a distinction between tertiary EFL, content, and ESP/EAP teaching. It's an artificial dilemma, a false trichotomy.

JG: You mention content, and I try myself to focus on it to provide my students with opportunities to use language in a more authentic manner and, hopefully, complete more meaningful tasks which seem to be more motivating. However, some professors at my university have little or no experience in TESL/TEFL. This may be a sweeping generalization, but at many Japanese universities the ESP courses are taught by teachers with little or no TESL/TEFL training or background, often in stereotypical teacher-fronted, large class-size lessons. What is the case at your current university regarding teacher training, curriculum and syllabus design, and the implementation of both?

MG: That's a loaded question, and one that seems to be pointing in many directions. My university observes academic freedom and non-interference, thank goodness. I wouldn't like it if administrators or the *kyoju-kai* tried to tell me how to run my classes. The last thing I would want is a nanny institution ordering re-education for teachers who don't follow some preconceived progressive notion of pedagogical orthodoxy. Esteemed 65-year old Prof. Saito, who has led the Microbiology section for 45 years, should not be held to (humiliated by?) current EFL notions about pedagogical correctness. Moreover, some classes may be acceptable, or even be better, if large or teacher-fronted. It's not as if all of my university classes back in the day were learner-centered tutorials. In fact, some of my most interesting classes were teacher-centered lectures.

Now, if a teacher really is struggling, or there is some egregious breach of teaching standards at my university, encouragement or criticism would be done at a very local level, such as from the head

professor of that section to the instructor in question. The usual means of faculty development are available, student feedback is encouraged, and, since we are all adults, it is expected that we all try to further our skills and professionalism through research, attending conferences, collaborations and the like, the details of which are up to the individual but are noted in the teachers' database and become a factor in contract renewals and the like. The *choices* we make about our professional development are not determined by our overlords.

JG: Professional development has certainly helped my own career and any involvement with it can only be an individual's choice. In a couple years, we will have some openings at my current university, and I will more than likely be asked to sit on the hiring committee. Based on your experience, which would you recommend for successful ESP teaching: an experienced EFL teacher with no experience in the ESP field of study, an experienced teacher with a background in the specific field of study, or a team-teaching approach (EFL teacher with no field experience plus Japanese teacher with the specialty background)?

MG: Either of the first two is fine – definitely not the third choice. The latter takes content out of the EFL person's hands and tacitly assumes that content is meaningful only when conveyed through the mother tongue; not exactly the best psychological footing for acquiring a second language. The EFL person has little or no meaningful role in such a team-teaching situation.

JG: Perhaps, that is why, when I have observed courses that have been taught using a team-teaching approach, the level of English skills and ability to communicate were almost non-existent. On a different, but somewhat related thread, there has recently been a growing body of research done on needs analysis with ESP/EAP. In your opinion, when it comes to field, or discipline-specific EFL courses, would you suggest conducting some sort of needs analysis before teaching the first lesson(s) or before designing the syllabus? What kind of analysis is most beneficial?

MG: I would never recommend a needs analysis for anything educational. I consider such things to be a waste of time and effort, a kind of grandiloquent sophistry. Instead, one should be able to anticipate what the educational needs the students may have (and it's not as if these are monolithic), not by an analysis but by simply getting some common sense info. Find out what other courses the students are taking (English or otherwise), typical student back-

ground, expectations of the administration, and anything about their current student English levels. It will be imperfect of course, and you'll end up adjusting it as you go along as certain needs (is that even the right word?) emerge. But you won't find these out by doing prior research – that just seems counter-intuitive and unnecessarily egg-headed to me.

JG: I somewhat agree. However, I find that perhaps an employer's needs analysis looking at the types of language skills a student needs in order to be successful at work or in that field may influence the curriculum and type of courses being offered. With the growing changes in the curriculum of universities regarding departments and core curriculum initiatives, there seems to be an increase in the number of ESP/EAP types of classes being offered. In addition, universities are always looking for experienced ESP/EAP educators. What advice would you offer an English teacher not familiar with the sciences or workplace English and yet is interested in becoming an ESP teacher?

MG: Most definitely it is to be more cognizant of discourse norms and modes of English. In short, being aware of how language communicates meaning through discourse. I teach medical students, and I had absolutely no prior medical education whatsoever, but it doesn't matter one iota. Why? Because as a trained and experienced EFL teacher I've developed an awareness of how English discourse is arranged, of noting discourse patterns relevant to my learners. The norms of specialized speech communities are not elusive if you have a general sense as to how language works. For example, when taking a patient history, explaining a diagnosis of a patient, or reporting medical data to a colleague, you don't need specialized technical knowledge or much familiarity with terminology to create good, meaningful ESP lessons. It's very natural if you use a discourse-based approach. People should get away from the simplistic notion that ESP means explaining terminology or technical terms- anyone can use a dictionary for those. Good tertiary English teaching is always good ESP teaching, meaning content-centered and discourse-based teaching, period.

JG: Thanks Mike for a very enlightening and openly refreshing discussion on the nature of ESP/EAP in Japanese universities today. I look forward to seeing you at the CUE 2009 Tezukayama Conference.

I hope my short interview with Mike has got you thinking about attending what will certainly be an