E. S. P.
SOME THOUGHTS ON
DESIGNING AND MOUNTING COURSES

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ABSTRACT

Having to prepare materials and courses for students who have quite specific needs and for which no text book is available is a very difficult task for any teacher of English as a Foreign/Second Language to fulfill. This paper tries to give an outline of the problems that must be faced and overcome, and gives some suggestions about how to set about preparing courses and materials.

Almost every teacher of E.F.L. is at some time or other in his career faced with the problem of teaching English to a student or group of students who need something a little more specialized than just 'English Conversation.' He may, for example, be asked to teach English for Business, or English to students who are going overseas to a foreign university to do a post-graduate degree, to a group of doctors, or to people in the advertising industry who have quite specific needs. In general there is simply no one text book available to fill those needs and for a teacher to use as a course book. Much of the material must be prepared to fit

the special needs of each individual group and this is often a very daunting task.

In Britain in the early '70's this problem was faced head on when terms like E.S.P. (English for Special or Specific Purposes), E.A.P. (English for Academic Purposes; i.e., what specific kind of English does a student need to pursue a course of study in a foreign language), E.S.T. (English for Science and Technology) and the like became very well-known and were much discussed. Most of these terms now often come lumped under the common term of English for Specific Purposes, or E.S.P. Several organizations, with the help of major publishers and some of the leading people in the field of EFL in Britain were set up to develop, test and teach highly-specialized tailor-made materials designed to fill specific needs in English. One of the foremost of these centres was Colchester English Study Centre in Essex and much of what is written here comes out of experience gained in that Centre over a period of years.

ESP tasks always came as practical problems, such as: mounting a course of English for firemen from Brunei who were going to be attached to a fire brigade in Britain for a period of training, diplomats from Germany who needed a course in 'Diplomatic English', Teachers of English from Francophone West Africa etc. etc., (there was even a course for Artificial Inseminators!); and the greatest effort therefore had to be applied initially to investigating and defining the problem as clearly as possible. There are three main areas of investigation initially involved in mounting an ESP course:

the students: their backgrounds, aims and expectations;
the subject matter of their specialism;
the language requirements which arise from these.

The Students

The students of ESP are by definition 'purposeful' in their initial approach to learning. It does not follow that they can be specific and articulate about what they want to learn. They might say they need an English course because they are going to study Computer Technology at a University without really knowing what kind of course they want or need. After all they are not professional English teachers. They are, however, likely to reject firmly what they perceive as irrelevant to their special needs. "One of the most striking characteristics of groups of ESP learners . . . . . is that they have a very clear idea of why they are learning the language, and very little tolerance of anything they consider irrelevant to this purpose. Endless sagas of the Brown family or Martin and Gillian very soon lead to disenchantment among learners whose interest in English is limited to chemical engineering or prehistoric fossils. These same learners will react much more favourably to material which is recognizably about their subject, and which is recognizably relevant to the purposes they have in mind in studying the language. Authentic texts about chemical engineering are obviously what chemical engineers should study." [1] Matching the ESP course to the expectations of the students, or convincing them of the relevance of the contents of the course, is therefore a first essential for success. Intending students can of course be measured by test as to their entry level of proficiency in general English. The broad definition of their special subject can also be arrived at fairly easily, although the discussion under the heading Subject Matter later should be remembered.

The third important dimension which must, however, be established is the students' degree of previous exposure to, and experience of the special area of, the language which they are to study. There is a continuum here: from pre-training, via post-theoretical training, through post-practical training, to post-experience. A student's place on this continuum will vitally affect the content and strategies adopted for his/her course. The pre-training student in a technical field may lack basic scientific and technical concepts of his subject, which must therefore be taught along with the language in which they are expressed. Conversely, the post-experience student can take part in problem-solving exercises which exploit his training and experience, and would be quite impossible for a beginner in the subject matter.

The Subject Matter

Teachers of ESP are in some ways comparable to a barrister. They are or should be an expert in the techniques and skills of their own profession. To be effective, however, they must be able to penetrate rapidly and selectively to the essential core of a specialised subject of which they may have no previous knowledge. Suppose the teacher is faced with planning, for example, a 5 week course for a group of 10 Japanese men who are going to be posted to foreign banks in English speaking countries; or a group of agronomists going to a S. E. Asian Country with English as its second language to advise on Agricultural matters. How does he/she set about this task?

The first step for the teacher is usually to attach a label to the planned course – e.g. medical, scientific, technical, engineering, banking, aviation. Such labels have great importance for the students in providing a kind of 'face validity' for the course. However, they have two built-in

dangers. The convenience of the broad-category label may blind us to the great variety of learning needs which it may cover. What, for example, is 'Medical English' or 'English for Doctors'? 'Medical English' could, for example, be applied to the pedagogically incompatible requirements of nurses, medical students, globe-trotting conference attenders, practising doctors, and trainee medical administrators. It does not follow that students to whom the same label can be applied can be taught together, or that materials developed for one 'medical' application will have any acceptability for another.

The narrow-category label, on the other hand, may serve to obscure common requirements. To break ' down 'engineering' into, for example, civil, mechanical, electrical, hydraulic, electronic, and computer might lead us to overlook that, at least at the level of early training, students in these fields share a need to work with many common concepts — e.g. measurements, number, time, location in space, variety of movement, qualities of matter, description, reporting, hypothesis. Further, a narrow label such as 'English for Electronics' may alienate students who might benefit from the course. It is, therefore, of great importance in planning an ESP course to research and define carefully the 'band width' of the special subject, and to label the course appropriately to keep this clearly in mind.

It is also of tremendous value in working our way into a new subject to secure the services of a specialised 'informant' who can guide us as to the appropriate 'topic syllabus' — by indicating which are the main 'centres of interest around which we should organize the subject matter to ensure representative coverage, such as in Accounting: Formation of Companies, Capital Structure, Balance Sheet, Trading and P/L account, Depreciation, Costing. Such an informant has several uses during the development of a course: organizing the subject matter, indicating sources or reference and

information, providing samples of specialised language at work, checking the authenticity of the specialised content of teaching materials. It is important, however, to approach your informant with a clear idea of the specific information or assistance you require. Best, however, not to ask if such & such is said in such & such a way, as he will often tell you the way it *ought* to be said, not how in fact it *is* said. Better to put a microphone round his neck and record his normal conversation in his field.

The question now in front of us is: in what does the 'specialness' of a given ESP requirement lie? How can we grasp it, measure it, and describe it in order to create a syllabus through which to teach it?

Lexis

The first sight of a sample of specialised language suggests that the specialness lies in its specialised lexis. While the teaching of specialised lexis is to a greater or lesser degree a component of all ESP courses, it is by no means the only or even the most important area of the ESP syllabus. Given the amount of time available for the preparation of most projects, the value of formal specialised word counts as a basis for selecting lexical items is questionable. It is preferable in general to ensure proper coverage by the careful selection of topic areas. Specialised lexis is frequently more of a problem for the teacher of ESP than for the student, by making analysis of the structure and intention of specialised language more difficult and by undermining the teacher's confidence in his/her own grasp of the subject matter. This can be overcome only by experience and training with the tools of linguistic analysis. Besides in many cases most specialists already know the English terms for things. In general, it seems that the most common lexical problems are

the abstract 'pivotal' words by which information is organised: e.g. connectors, gambits, etc.

Structures

Generally speaking, it is not really cost effective to design materials to teach specialised use of English until the student has acquired a mastery of a basic core of the structures of English. By that I mean ESP courses rarely start with beginners. There frequently remain gaps in the student's mastery which will require on-going remedial teaching during a given course. These may be predicted by test, or dealt with as they arise. Beyond this point I believe broadly that the emphasis in an ESP course should lie on the application of that language which has been acquired to the purposes for which it is being learnt, extending the range where the purposes require it. An ordinary student may want to describe an ashtray as follows: "It's round, it's made of glass and it is about 6 inches across. It's for putting ash in." Whereas a scientist may need to describe it thus: "It is a cross-section of a cylindrical object made of vitreous material with a diameter of 6 inches and a height of 1 inch."

It follows that coverage of a complete structural catalogue is not seen as an essential aim of an ESP course. Selection within the structural catalogue will depend on what the student is required to do with the language, and therefore how the language expresses such intentions i.e. it has to be totally specific to his needs. Let me give you an example: I think everyone will agree that pronunciation & intonation are an essential component of every English course. However, when CESC was asked to prepare a course for Air Hostesses for a major Aisan Air Line, CESC was told specifically not to attempt to change the girls' pronunciation & intonation as part of their charm was the way they spoke/pronounced the English language. Heresy indeed!

Reference might be made to the work of Dr. David Wilkins and his paper "The Linguistic and Situational Content of the Common Core in a Unit Credit System" and to the materials produced by Dr. Henry Widdowson and his collaborators in the "English in Focus" series. [2]

To quote briefly Dr. Wilkins's own words on the subject:

> "The value of the notional approach is that it forces one to consider the communicative value of everything that is taught. Items are not taught just because they are there. . . . . I believe that notional syllabuses will provide a path along which we can make new advances in defining the content of language curricula." [3]

This approach then forces us to consider the communicative priorities of our target group. We need to establish:

* the basic language skills and their combinations which are required. The research scientist will probably have much more use for a specialised reading skill than a telephonist.
* the communicative functions which they will require to operate: to describe, persuade, explain, elicit information, express sympathy, command, instruct, summarise, etc.
* the notions and concepts which are the common currency of their special subject, e.g. for meteorologists: measurement of pressure, density, altitude, temperature, for doctors: spatial relationships in the body, degrees of discomfort, pain; for bankers: number, ratios, percentages.

However, this stage of investigation raises the following problem. It is not possible to enquire directly of potential students what are their requirements under the headings of language skills, communicative functions, and notions. They simply lack the concepts with which to gain the necessary insight. It is therefore necessary, like a good doctor, to pose questions in a form answerable by the patient and, from the symptomsdescribed, to interpret and prescribe on the basis of professional knowledge. A useful technique for this is to employ a questionnaire, in which the students or their sponsors are asked to mark which, among a selection of functionally described activities, they are aiming to be able to carry out in the target language. For example, such activities might include:

* To be able to attend conferences in his/her special area and understand the main content of a talk/lecture, but not every word, and take notes
* To be able to write a summary of such a lecture from notes taken at the time
* To be able to read specialised articles in his/her own field with the aid of a dictionary
* To be able to give straightforward spoken instructions in the use of tools
* To be able to ask questions of a patient in non-medical language in order to obtain information about symptoms.

In this way questions, based initially on informed speculation, are put to potential students in a form which they can answer relatively easily. This constitutes a form of work study, and can be supplemented by more formal work studies and interviews. The results can then be examined and interpreted in terms of the language content and skills required to be built into the syllabus.

Source Materials

Parallel to the investigation just described, samples of the language of the special area are collected for analysis and as a basis for teaching materials. By now one should have a good idea of the areas of lexis, structure, notions, and communicative acts which will form the content of the syllabus. One can, therefore, approach the sample materials knowing broadly for what one is looking. This is a much more desirable situation than starting one's investigation from texts and recordings, which can otherwise distract and deflect the line of investigation. It is much more productive to be able to ask the question: 'What forms of language does a doctor usually employ to describe a patient's symptoms to his/her colleagues?' rather than: 'What does medical English consist of?'

By use of the first type of question, areas of specialised language can be identified, circumscribed, studied, described, related to their communicative function, and finally taught; in the knowledge that one has a proper insight into their function and use, and can base the teaching on authentic samples. A word of caution here: authentic is the key word. Keith Morrow says, "An authentic text is a stretch of real language produced by a real speaker or writer for a real audience and designed to convey a real message of some sort. In other words it is *not* a made-up text produced by an imaginary speaker or writer for an imaginary audience and designed to practise specific language points rather than to convey real information." [4]

"The big danger, I think, is that teachers often select texts for use solely on the grounds of their topic. They then fail to ask themselves further questions to see if the subject is being talked about in the terms which their students are going to want to use or which they may actually come across themselves." [5]   The teacher must ask himself of any texts

he/she wishes to use, the following questions, "What ____?, Why ____?, Who ____?, How ____?".

What is my material about?
— Will my students want to deal with language on this subject? (And we must be precise in our answers. 'Firefighting' or 'medicine' are far too general, Servicing a 5 hp Pump or Techniques of Emergency Resuscitation are rather better.)

Why was my material produced?
— Will my students want to deal with language intended to do the same thing? (e.g. to entertain; to advise; to give instructions.)

Who
— was my material produced for?
— are my students in this category? (And again we should be precise. Simply Firemen or Doctors may not be good enough.)

How
— was my material produced?
— was it written or spoken? Will my students have to deal with language like this in this mode?

So, the stage of preparation leading from an investigation of the student's needs to a definition of learning objectives and syllabus content is by far the most important stage of mounting an ESP course. Broadly the steps involved are:

* Who are the students and what are their expectations?
* What is the subject matter and how broadly or narrowly should it be defined?
* What are the language requirements which follow from this in terms of structural review, notions requiring expression or comprehension, communicative acts required of the learner, language skills, lexis, situations

and contexts within which they should be able to operate?

It can fairly be said, then, that one's position should not be one of being tied exclusively to a structural, situational, notional, or other approach. Rather I feel that each of these has something to offer in the way of analytical tools, descriptive frameworks, and taxonomies with which to select and describe the contents of a teaching syllabus for ESP.

Syllabus Design

By syllabus design we all understand the organisation of the selected contents into an ordered and practical sequence for teaching purposes. There is nothing special about ESP in this sense. The usual criteria for syllabus design apply:

* progress from known to unknown matter
* appropriate size of teaching units
* a proper variety of activity
* teachability
* creating a sense of purpose for the student — overtly by test and feedback covertly by leading him to performances which demonstrate his growing proficiency.

But since so many elements of an ESP syllabus are novel, it is valuable to begin by drafting a prototype unit — not usually the first unit, which has untypical elements of introduction and presentation. The unit constitutes a complete teaching cycle of a given number of lessons. Such cycles recur, like chapters in a book, to give a form and unity to the course for both teacher and taught. This draft unit is, if time permits, reviewed by colleagues, field-tested, revised, and then tested

again. The main test criteria are:

teachability
level
appropriateness and authenticity of content
learning progress

Once a prototype unit has been thoroughly tested, the other units of a course can be written remarkably rapidly; since most of the design and sequencing decisions are already made, and the only remaining decisions are those of final selection of content. In this sense, the time spent on the prototype is always an excellent investment.

Teaching Techniques

The term ESP seems to imply exotic teaching techniques. This is misleading, and in fact most 'conventional' techniques have their place on an ESP course. The relative stress on oral or written techniques will depend on the particular requirements of the group, which will have been defined in advance; but as in the selection of teaching items, the 'communicative approach' implies that every teaching strategy employed is considered in the light of its contribution to the development of a relevant communicative skill. To make one generalisation in the area of technique, the greater awareness of specific teaching objectives which is part of the ESP course leads more and more towards attempting to stimulate in the classroom the target performance in the language. The areas of 'games', 'projects', 'role-play' and 'problem-solving' are particularly fruitful in providing ideas which can be most successfully exploited in class for this purpose. Some observations on this are:

* Situations of conflict, with defined and unique roles for different students, lead to much more stimulating and constructive interaction than the discussion of problems in which all take part as peers

* Students with practical experience of their special area are much more able to work successfully with problem-solving and, particularly, role-playing exercises than those who lack experience

* Certain groups, particularly qualified doctors, who are professionally on their mettle are not prepared to simulate roles and adopt given characters; they are prepared only to be themselves, but will work, however, on true professional problem-solving exercises

* The rapid oral interaction in role-playing exercises causes problems for the teacher in providing effective feedback and correction. Intervention during a simulation can destroy the illusion of reality that has been carefully built up. We can tackle this in a number of ways: (a) by slowing down the pace of interaction (b) by making an audio-recording which can be edited and played back with comments and exercises (c) by video-recording all or some of the simulation for group and individual evaluation; this last technique has proved to be the most successful

* Experience of a few such simulations soon allows the teacher and materials writer to predict, and prepare in advance, areas of language difficulty

* One of the main teaching benefits of the use of simulation and role-playing as a technique is the building up of the students' confidence in their ability to use the language they have acquired to achieve a communicative aim: e.g. to explain, persuade, obtain information

* The context of situation established for and developed during a simulation gives many opportunities, which

can be exploited as required, to provide real and relevant follow-up work on written skills in the form of letters, contracts, reports, and summaries.

The Changing Role of the Teacher in ESP

Teachers who take on a commitment to work in the area of ESP find certain demands placed upon them. First, they must be equipped and prepared to enter new and unfamiliar fields of human activity and knowledge — banking, medicine, computer technology. This implies that, if they are not to be distracted or unsettled by this, they must be so experienced that their professional teaching techniques are second nature. They cannot be concerned with 'How do I teach?' when their attention will need to be focussed primarily on 'What should I be teaching?' They must also be equipped with the linguistic tools necessary to see beyond the specialised lexis of a new subject, and to investigate the functions and intention of samples of specialised language, interpret them for the students, and teach the forms of language through which those intentions are expressed.

They must have the personal self-confidence that is not shaken by being aware of knowing less about a specialised subject than their students. Conversely, they must be prepared to do sufficient homework on the areas with which they are going to deal to cope with the reasonable demands of the students. Finally they must be prepared to stand down from the central role in the classroom from time to time, and let the specialised knowledge and experience of the students generate specialised interaction of which they personally are not capable. Having established the conditions for such interaction, their role will be one of observer, adviser, and corrector of errors. A specialised class is soon frustrated if the level of expert discussion is constantly limited to the level of expertise of the language teacher.

In an ESP course, creating an impression of authenticity and relevance to the students' aims is far more effective in harnessing learning potential then any specific item of content or teaching technique. The ESP revolution took place initially in the area of definition of learning objectives not in teaching strategies which adapt naturally to new objectives.

(Acknowledgement must be made to John Webb, Director of Colchester English Study Centre on whom I have drawn heavily for ideas and material.)

[1] 'English for Special Purposes': Morrow, M.E.P. 1977, p. 14.

[2] Published by O.U.P.

[3] Grammatical, Situational and Notional Syllabuses: D. A.Wilkins (Paper presented to 3rd AILA Congress, Copenhagen, 1972)

[4] 'Authentic Texts & ESP' Morrow, from *ESP*, Ed. Susan Holden, MEP, 1977, p. 13

[5] ibid, p. 15

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