

ESP TEACHING AND THE ESP TEACHER - ARE THEY BETTER OR ARE THEY JUST DIFFERENT?

Adrian BRUNELLO¹, Florina-Elena BRUNELLO²

¹Assist. Prof. PhD, „Apollonia” University of Iași, Romania

²Teacher of English, „Gheorghe Asachi” Technical College, Iași, Romania

Corresponding author: Adrian Brunello; e-mail: adrian_brunello@yahoo.com

Abstract

The majority of Romanian high-school students who study English need it for travelling, for business and some of them for pleasure. That is why they must be properly prepared and aware of the fact that they have to pay attention to their English teacher. A teacher who teaches in vocational schools plays an important role in the life of the students because he must adapt the teaching style according to their needs. The teacher should use a mixture between the ESP teaching style and the normal teaching style. The important issue here is whether or not these teaching styles present important differences and therefore being an ESP teacher represents a significant competitive advantage in today's highly globalized society.

Keywords: *English for special purposes, teaching techniques, general English teaching, ESP teaching.*

1. INTRODUCTION

We all know that English is an international language and that nowadays our world has become dominated by technology and commerce. Tom Hutchinson and Adam Waters (1987) consider that English “created a new generation of learners who knew specifically why they were learning a language - businessmen and businesswomen who wanted to sell their products, mechanics who had to read instruction manuals, doctors who needed to keep up with developments in their field and a whole range of students whose course of study included textbooks and journals only available in English” (HUTCHINSON & WATERS, 1987).

In Romania, high-school teachers must take into account the curricula given by the Romanian Ministry of Education when they prepare their lessons and it is a pity that very often the textbooks do not completely fulfil the needs of the teachers. Therefore, they must be adapted according to the students' needs and level of

knowledge. Authentic texts can be a real help, and patience, time and, why not, money is required. Of course, the English teacher has to find out some information related to the students' field of study, what they are interested in, but it is not necessary to become a teacher of a particular subject matter.

ESP can be traced back to the end of the Second World War in 1945 when the position of English language changed completely which was to play a more practical role in the scientific and economic development occurring all over the world. This new situation created a new attitude towards learning English in order to cope with the currencies of technology and commerce. It could be said that since the late 1980s, ESP has established itself not only as an important and distinctive branch of ELT, but has also incorporated most of the work on discourse and genre analysis, as well as the results of corpus linguistics.

ESP teaching produces many problems, both for learners and for teachers. These problems can be divided into two categories: problems of methodology and materials, and problems of assessment and testing. All these issues can be solved; however, they require better teachers and better training. In order to make ESP teaching successful, teachers have to view ESP teaching as a normal and acceptable challenge. Moreover, they need to understand as fully as possible the nature of the ESP teaching, they have to be able to observe and organize the learner's progress and to diagnose his problems.

Furthermore, teachers have to be familiar with the widest possible range of alternative teaching techniques, they have to be aware of the learning requirements and the learner's needs. They have

to be optimistic and to know that success is possible; ESP teachers need to exercise professionalism based on training and experience.

2. THE ROLE OF THE ESP TEACHER

The ESP teacher's role has many facets. Some authors, such as Swales (1985), prefer to use the concept of "ESP practitioner" rather than "ESP teacher," due to the fact that it has a much more complex role in English language classroom. Besides the traditional functions of the normal English teacher, the ESP teacher also deals with aspects such as needs analysis, syllabus design, materials writing or adaptation and evaluation. Another significant difference is represented by the fact that most ESP teachers have not been trained as such. Therefore, teachers have to become familiar with new environments for which, most of them, have very few notions about.

Comparing general English teaching with ESP teaching, we certainly notice both similarities and differences. The difference is that many general English language teachers are trained to become teachers of English while the great majority of ESP teachers are not trained as such. ESP teachers need, therefore, to orientate themselves to a new environment for which they have not generally been prepared. Regardless of the existence of this significant difference, as Jordan (1997) believes, ESP teachers obviously have much in common with any language teacher. The ESP teacher needs to take account of developments in linguistics and learning theory, aims to keep up with current views on the place of learners in the education system, and has to confront the new technologies offered as aids to improve pedagogy. What distinguishes, the ESP teachers from many teachers in the world of ELT, however, is the additional and crucial need to understand, the requirements of other professionals, either academic or occupational, the differences in learning conditions in terms of both learners' needs, age, etc.

Flowedew and Peacock (2001) argue that the role of teacher will vary according to the type of syllabus, course and the part of the world in which it takes place. Richards and Rodgers (2001)

consider that the roles of the teachers are related both to assumptions about language and language learning at the level of approach. In line with Richards and Rodgers, no one can claim that ESP teachers should perform the same activities in their different ESP classrooms. That is, naturally speaking, as ESP classes are different in terms of learners' different purposes and different fields of study. Therefore, teachers are required to have a variety of teaching activities in their classrooms according to their learners.

3. THE STAGES OF ESP TEACHING

ESP teaching has developed through five different stages. These can briefly be summarised as following:

A. Register Analysis

This was the first phase in ESP teaching, and it emerged between 1960s and early 1970s. It was mainly connected with the work of some linguists like Peter Strevens (1964) and Jack Ewer (1969). In this phase, it was assumed that ESP constituted a specific register different from that of general English. The purpose of this approach was to identify the grammatical and lexical features of these registers. It could be said that the aim behind this approach was to make the ESP course more relevant to learners' needs, and to produce a syllabus which gave high priority to the language forms that the students would meet in their science studies and vice-versa it would give low priority to forms they would not meet. This approach showed that there is little linguistic justification for having highly specialized texts and, in addition, there is no clear relationship between sentence grammar and specialization of knowledge.

B. Discourse Analysis

In this stage, the main assumption was that the difficulties which students encounter appear not so much from a detective knowledge of the system of English, but from unfamiliarity with English use. That is why the main concern of an ESP course was to identify the organizational patterns in texts and to specify the linguistic means by which these patterns would then form

the syllabus of the ESP course. The pioneer of this school was Henry Widdowson (1983).

C. Target Situation Analysis

The aim of this movement was to take the student's existing knowledge and set it on a scientific basis, by establishing procedures for relating language analysis more closely to learners' actual needs. This theory assumed that the purpose of an ESP course is to enable learners to function adequately in a target situation, that is, the situation in which the learners will use the language they are learning, then the process of the ESP course design should follow by first identifying the target situation and then carrying out a thorough analysis of the linguistic features of that situation. John Munby (1978), made a significant and an outstanding contribution to develop this theory in his famous book "Communicative Syllabus Design."

D. Skills-Centred Approach

This approach aimed at considering the thinking process that underlies language use. The fundamental concept of this assumption is that underlying all language use there are common reasoning and interpreting processes, which regardless of the surface forms, enable us to extract meaning from discourse. Therefore, the main concern should be on the underlying interpretive strategies, which enable the learner to cope with the surface forms.

E. A Learning-Centred Approach

Briefly, this approach goes up against all of the phases presented above, which were all based on descriptions of language use, since the main concern in an ESP course should be the language learning and not the language use.

All in all, ESP teaching should be seen not as any particular language product but as an approach to ELT governed by a specific reason for learning. In this regard, Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) theorize that ESP teaching has generally been seen as a separate activity within ELT, partly because it has developed its own methodology, and partly because it rests on disciplines other than applied linguistics, particularly second language teaching. This openness to the insights of other disciplines,

however, should not lead us to forget that ESP is an essential component of ELT, retaining its emphasis on practical outcomes stemming from needs analysis, genre analysis and preparing learners to communicate effectively.

4. KEY FEATURES OF ESP TEACHING

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) consider that needs analysis represents the most characteristic feature of an ESP course. Moreover, they emphasize the importance of two types of analysis: the analysis of target situation needs and the analysis of learning needs. The former, is concerned with the language use and the latter involves the language learning theory or the way people learn the language. As a matter of fact, ESP can simply be seen as an "approach" to teaching English language. One way to characterize ESP from general English is the concept of register analysis which makes the ESP course more relevant to learners' needs. It can be argued that the ultimate goal of this process is to produce a syllabus that meets the learners' academic and professional needs.

Often, ESP teachers have to put in a lot of effort to become familiar with the language and subject matter that they are about to teach. At times, teachers who were trained for General English teaching may be confronted with texts they know almost nothing about. The significant question that appears here is whether or not the ESP teacher needs to understand the subject matter of the ESP material. The first impulse would be to say yes. If a teacher who teaches literature has much information about the literary texts and the authors he teaches, why should a different standard apply to the teaching of Commerce, Tourism, Economics, Finance, Management or Marketing? But, in order to come up with a specific answer, one should take into account aspects, such as the extent to which the ESP materials are specialised, why it is difficult for some teachers to understand the ESP subject matter and what kind of knowledge is required of the ESP teacher.

Analysing the content of ESP materials one might say that there is little linguistic justification for having highly specialised texts. The discourse

structure of specialised texts may be denser and more formalised, but it is not different in kind from that of less specialised materials. Of course, there is a higher amount of specialised vocabulary, but this does not make it more difficult to understand. In fact, it may even be easier because some terms and concepts have now become internationally well-known. Basically, the difference lies in the subject knowledge and not in the language knowledge. The use of highly specialised texts creates validity. They motivate learners because they are seen as relevant. But the texts used have to represent elements of the learning process. The texts must also be handled well by the teachers. ESP materials must take account of the teacher's knowledge and competence. They represent vital elements in the teaching-learning process and must be able to influence issues such as the choice of texts. One strong point of the ESP teacher is that, unlike the General English teacher, he has the capacity and the power to influence syllabi and materials according to his own capacities.

ESP teachers have difficulties understanding different ESP subject matters due to a number of reasons:

- The tradition in education of separating Humanities and Sciences makes the ESP teacher to have very little information about the latter
- Some teachers are reluctant to learn new things and as they come to teach specialised language only due to economic pressures, they do not present a great desire to improve their knowledge on the new area
- There has not been enough effort to retrain teachers
- In ESP there is the tendency of expecting the teachers to adapt to the requirements of the target situation on their own

All these considerations have made teachers feel uncomfortable with the subject matter they are expected to teach. On the contrary, teachers should be encouraged to improve their knowledge on the subject matter that they teach and they have to be shown that specialised subject areas can, at times, even be appealing. The idea is that ESP teachers do not have to become specialists in the particular subject matter they are teaching. But it is extremely important

for teachers to have a positive attitude towards the ESP content, to know the fundamental principles of the subject area, to be aware of how much they really know and to ask pertinent questions in order to enrich their knowledge.

The key to success is a meaningful teacher-student communication in the classroom. Although the teacher must have some information about the subject matter of the ESP material, in the learning-centred approach students also play a significant role, helping the teacher to acquire the basic knowledge about the subject.

Unlike General English, the status of ESP changes from being a subject in its own right to a service industry for other fields of study. Therefore, the ESP teacher encounters a series of problems such as: low priority in timetabling; lower status than subject teachers; isolation from other English teachers; lack of respect from students. However, this is not a general phenomenon. The shift from General English to ESP results in a teacher more accountable to others. Therefore, the ESP practitioner needs to be a good negotiator. ESP teaching involves a close connection between the subject specialists and the ELT teachers. It is assumed that the ELT teacher can only be capable of dealing with ESP effectively if he has the active co-operation of subject teachers. Moreover, the ESP teacher may also have to struggle to master language and subject matter beyond the bounds of their previous experience, and he needs to understand that ESP teaching should be carried out in collaboration with the subject area specialists. In this regard, Dudley Evan and St. John (1998) consider that this kind of teamwork can be categorized into three levels: co-operation, collaboration and team teaching.

Co-operation here refers to gathering information from the subject department about the content of the course, the tasks required of students, the expectations of that respective department and its related discourse community about the nature of communication in the subject.

Collaboration, involves the mutual working of the ELT teacher and the subject specialist. That is to say, they work together outside the classroom to develop specific activities and tasks in ESP class that run concurrently with the subject specialist to help the students to cope with the course.

When it comes to team-teaching, the ELT teacher and the subject specialist should act simultaneously in the same classroom. It is worth mentioning that, the team-teaching approach can be especially advantageous in teaching the productive skills (listening and speaking) where the role of the ELT teacher is to prepare the material for the session in co-operation with the subject specialist and to run the session, while the role of the subject specialist refers to monitoring and giving advice to clarify some points about the core of the subject and to evaluate the students' responses and contributions in the discussion. Furthermore, the subject specialist should also be consulted in constructing the examination questions.

Such cooperation should represent a two-way process: the specialist helps the ESP teacher in learning more about the learner's target situation. At the same time, the ESP teacher makes the specialist more aware of the language problems learners (and the ESP teacher himself) face.

The ESP teacher may also have to negotiate in a more physical sense. Cramped classrooms, often in inconvenient locations, badly ventilated or heated, with a great deal of outside noise, are only too common. The role ESP teachers are called on to play here is obviously one of adaptability and flexibility. They need to be prepared to accept such conditions and to do their best to improvise. The most important way in which the ESP teacher becomes a negotiator is with regard to the learners, themselves. Opposed to the General English teacher, the ESP teacher may be faced with a series of expectations regarding the nature, content and achievements of the course. This situation is clearly present when we have learners of different subject areas in the same class. Although there is little justification for having very specific materials, learners still demand them. Coping with the situation will be much easier if the ESP teacher tries to understand why learners demand such materials and then they try to negotiate a compromise: making learners more aware of their real needs and using enjoyable methodologies to distract attention and avoid any possible conflict.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Students do not simply learn English because they want to, but because they will certainly need it in their future careers. Nowadays, English has become the most widely-spoken language in job-related environments. Students need to have a good command of English not only because they have to pass some school exams, but also because they need to use it for work or future studies.

ESP represents a learner-centered approach. All teaching activities are triggered by the specific needs of the students. Therefore, when speaking about ESP, teachers should take into account elements such as: needs analysis, material development and its implementation or relevant assessment. It is advisable to actively involve students in the process of choosing the content materials, curriculum development and teaching methodology. By doing so, teachers will gain completely committed and motivated students.

ESP practitioners play a number of different roles such as: teachers, course designers and material providers, collaborators, researchers and evaluators. Moreover, the task of ESP practitioners is highly challenging because they do not always know the content better than their students. This is why ESP teaching requires a very professional behavior on behalf of the teachers who must continuously enrich their knowledge and stay up-to-date with the ongoing research performed in the various fields of ESP.

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