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TUNIS

What is English for Specific Purposes?

GRAMMATICALLY SPEAKING, THE QUESTION POSED IN THE TITLE OF THIS ARTICLE, "What is English for Specific Purposes?" is a simple one. However, it has generated extensive discussion, disagreement, argument, and occasionally some consensus in the broader field of teaching English to speakers of other languages (ESOL). Many of us have asked and continue to ask ourselves this question and we may have an answer, but it keeps changing depending on which article we have just read, whose lecture we have just heard, or what kind of ESP class we have been asked (or required) to teach. My own answer to the question has been developing and changing since 1977, when I began teaching English for specific purposes. In this article I would like share my answer by presenting five valuable lessons I have learned about ESP.

Early days

Several years ago I was an adviser at the ESP Centre at Alexandria University in Egypt where we were involved in an ESP teacher training project. One of the expert consultants on this project was John M. Swales, a well known proponent of ESP. He told me two things that I've not forgotten. First, he said that the way we view the field of ESP today is far different than the way we viewed it in the 1960s. In the 1960s ESP practitioners believed their main job was to teach the technical vocabulary of a given field or profession. If you were teaching nursing students, your task was to teach them the medical vocabulary of nursing. You followed a general English syllabus that was "flavored" with medical and nursing vocabulary. Later, teachers of ESP began to recognize the importance of sub-technical vocabulary, that is, the words and phrases that surround the technical words (see Kennedy and Bolitho 1984). At the same time, the movement in ESOL towards learner-centered teaching was reflected in ESP by the focus on learner needs and needs analysis as the underpinning of course design. Later, discourse and genre analysis and linguistic corpora began to inform the field (see Widdowson 1981; Trimble 1985; Swales 1990, Johns and Dudley-Evans 1993). This history and development of the field is something that most ESP practitioners know well.

The second thing Swales told me is something only someone with his perspective and years of working in the field of ESP could know. He said that new ESP teachers seem to have to go through the same stages of development personally that the field has gone through since the 1960s—beginning with an urge to teach general English with technical vocabulary, moving to an awareness of the importance of sub-technical vocabulary and needs analysis, and emerging eventually to recognition of the need to use discourse analysis and linguistic corpora. At this point, they understand what ESP is.

When I thought about his insightful observation, I had to agree. That is exactly what happened in my career. I'd like to go back and describe one of my early forays into ESP, and then explain the first valuable lesson I learned from it.

Lists of words

Things seemed easier then. I had had a couple of years of ESOL experience as a Peace Corps Volunteer, I was studying for my M.A. in linguistics, and I thought I knew everything. When I was asked to teach English to international graduate students in the school of medicine at a university in the U.S., I thought, "How difficult can this be? I'll get a list of medical terms and find a book on English for doctors." So I got my list and book, I got my students, and I got a few surprises. The students were not interested in my materials. In fact, they thought my class was a waste of their time—a hindrance rather than a help in achieving their degrees.

Why? I went to class prepared to teach the meanings of words such as apnea, asthma, rhinoplasty, and blastocyst. Naturally, I began by saying something like "Does anyone know what *apnea* means?" Every hand went up. In fact, every hand went up for every word on my list. That day I learned my first lesson in ESP: ESP is not simply teaching technical vocabulary. My students already knew the technical terms of their field of study, because they had learned them along with their native English-speaking classmates from their content professors.

Authentic material, authentic language

Next I tried some material from an ESP text-book written for students of various professions. I was greeted with polite boredom when I presented the students with this text from the chapter on the medical profession (see Figure 1).

Why were the students so uninterested in this? That day I learned my second lesson in ESP: reading or writing about a profession is not the same as reading or writing texts actually used in that profession. These students were writing lab reports and completing patient charts. In their medical classes, they were listening to lectures and participating in discussions. At the hospital, they were participating in rounds and talking to patients, orderlies, nurses, and doctors. They did not need to learn how to write friendly letters in English to their relatives because they were not planning to write such letters. Maybe they were writing friendly letters to Uncle Ahmad or Uncle Kenji, but they would do so in Arabic or Japanese not English.

215 Albemarle Road
Fort Worth, Texas
March 17, 1977

Dear Uncle Ben,

Thanks for you letter. I read it this afternoon while I was eating lunch. Now I'm answering it sitting in a hot bath.

It was good to hear your news of the family. I was very pleased to hear of Steve's interest in medicine. But why do you want me to talk to him about becoming a surgeon? You say it would be "more interesting." Do you think that if Steve became a general practitioner he'd be bored? You know, general practice is what I've been doing these past weeks as an intern in the emergency ward. Let me tell you about last night, and you tell me if you think it's boring.

I came on duty at around 11:30. Shortly after midnight a police rescue squad came in with a married couple—both of them in bad shape. The woman had tried to commit suicide by swallowing a bottle of aspirin. Her husband was so shocked that he had a mild heart attack...

Figure 1: From Draper and Sather (1969) *All in a Day's Work.*

Fortunately, however, when they were given an extract from one of the medical journals they used for research, they showed a lot more interest. Using the following extract (see Figure 2), I taught the skills needed to derive meaning from it, such as skimming for gist and recognizing text cohesion and passive voice constructions.

The support the medical students needed in their English classes was help with the language of definition, clarification, and explanation used in both spoken (lectures) and written (textbook) discourse. They needed to be familiar with phrases from spoken discourse, such as "What X means is Y" and "If you have A and it does B, then that's C." To read their textbooks, students needed to be able to recognize, for example, that a word in bold or italic was the one being defined and that sometimes the definition preceded rather than followed the term.

As I continued to find myself in varied ESP situations in the ensuing years I continued to learn, sometimes by making mistakes. For example, graduate students of various academic disciplines studying in one of my English

Figure 2: Extract from Kulstad (1986) *AIDS: Papers from* Science, *1982–1985.*

Sequence of the Envelope Glycoprotein Gene of Type II Human T Lymphotropic Virus

Joseph Sodroski, Roberto Patarca, Denis Perkins, Debra Briggs, Tun-Hou Lee, Myron Essex, John Coligan, Flossie Wong-Staal, Robert C. Gallo, and William A. Haseltine

Human T-cell leukemia viruses have been implicated as the etiological agents of several human diseases. The most prevalent type, HTLV-I, is associated with a high incidence of an aggressive form of adult T-cell leukemia (ATLL) and several unusual forms of mycosis fungoides and Sezary syndrome (1). A second member of the family, HTLV-II, has been isolated from a patient with benign hairy cell leukemia of T-cell origin (2). Recently, a new group of viruses, HTLV-III, was isolated from patients with acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) (3).

The envelope glycoprotein is the major antigen recognized by the serum of persons infected with HTLV (4). In this respect HTLV resembles several other retroviruses for which the envelope glycoprotein is typically the most antigenic viral polypeptide (5).

classes told me they sometimes had trouble understanding lectures but were afraid to ask questions. I wanted to help them and decided to visit some of the lectures in their other classes. I made a chart to record question-type frequency from the native speaker students. My chart included *wh,* yes-no, tag, and intonation questions, as well as a column for polite question forms. At the end of the third lecture I attended, my chart was blank. These commonly taught question forms were not in use. I found out that native speakers used other question forms, for example, echo questions in which the questioner repeats the last two or three words of the speaker's statement with a rising intonation and stress on the segment to be clarified, as in this example:

> **Speaker:** "... and the answer is the square root of X to the fourth power."
>
> **Questioner:** [with rising intonation] "The square root of X *to the fourth power?"*

They also frequently used repetition beginning with the word *so,* followed by a very short pause, then emphasis on the segment to be clarified, as in this example:

> **Speaker:** "Elevated temperatures increase white cell activity."
>
> **Questioner:** "So, you are saying that elevated temperatures *increase* white cell activity?"

That day I learned my third lesson in ESP: authentic language may not be what you assume it to be, so don't trust your intuition or the intuition of the ESP textbook writer. Analyze and teach the language in use in the particular situation relevant to your students.

Needs analysis

Later in my career, I was using needs analysis as the first step in teaching ESP, and I learned that there was more to this process than met the eye. For example, when I was asked to develop an English class for medical students in a university in Egypt, I did a needs analysis by asking their medical professors and department heads what kinds of English skills the students needed. I was told that the students needed reading and writing, but mostly they needed listening and speaking since all content lectures were delivered in English. Therefore, I built a strong listening/speaking component into the course I was designing. Shortly after the course began, I decided to visit some of the content lectures with the idea of developing more listening material for the English course. Rather disconcertingly, I found that in every class I visited, the teaching was done in Arabic. All of the medical terms were English, but they were nestled comfortably in sentences of Modern Standard Arabic. The only non-medical English words I heard used were "okay" and "well."

That was my fourth lesson in ESP: needs analysis is good, but it should never be unilateral. Simply asking the professors or supervisors what kind of English their students or employees need probably won't result in a very accurate picture of students' actual needs. After all, medical professors and department heads at universities and supervisors in the corporate world are not trained linguists. People typically focus on the messages conveyed by language, not the language itself, and therefore their assessment of language needs may not be correct. Observation and analysis are essential to find out what the real language needs are. (For a thorough discussion of different types of needs analysis for ESP course design see Chambers 1980 and Hutchinson and Waters 1987.)

Discourse communities and corporate culture

At one point I was part of a team developing a course for graduate students in presentation skills needed for professional conferences. We produced video tapes of a 'bad' presentation versus a 'good' one. We had students prepare and practice many presentations, paying particular attention to keeping the length to 40 minutes in order to allow about 10 minutes for questions and comments from the audience. A year later I attended a medical conference. Imagine my surprise when I found out that the average length of a presentation was only 10 to 15 minutes! At many business conferences presentations are typically only 15 to 20 minutes long. I was rudely reminded of the third ESP lesson: don't trust your intuition, so don't assume that a discourse situation in your field is the same as in others.

At various times I have found myself teaching courses in English for business to students of business and commerce, and these have provided additional learning opportunities for me. At first I assumed that all business students should be able to write a business letter—a fair

Al-Shamsi Travel
PO Box 1234
Dubai UAE

20 April 1999

All Staff
Dubai Men's College
PO Box 1234
Dubai
United Arab Emirates

Dear Staff Member

May I take this opportunity to introduce our agency Al-Shamsi Travel and Tourism; an IATA Travel Agent since 1978 and experienced in providing a wide range of services.

Our agency specializes in:
- Hotel Bookings – all regions of the United Arab Emirates and around the world
- Sight Seeing Tours
- Airline Tickets
- Group/F.I.T. Arrangements
- VIP Services
- Safaris/Desert Safaris
- Transportation
- Congress/Seminar Organization

As experienced travel agents, we believe that customer satisfaction depends on quality of service. We offer a team of multilingual professionals to meet the needs of our valued clients, and Al-Shamsi Travel and Tourism will always be at your disposal. Our aim is to give you, as a staff member of Dubai Men's College, the best service and the most competitive rates possible.

Please do not hesitate to contact me should you need assistance or more information; I sincerely look forward to serving you in the near future.

Yours sincerely

Sayed Mateen Ahmad
General Manager

Figure 3: A Genuine Business Letter

assumption in most situations. In preparing to teach business letter writing, I relied on rules of format and content that I had learned from my English teachers years ago in high school. I also relied on examples I found in various English for business textbooks written by ESL/EFL teachers. Figure 3 shows what a real business letter looks like.

This letter, which has no punctuation in the addresses, salutation, and closing, is a common style used in business today. The letters also lacks linking words and phrases *(but, in addition, moreover)* used as cohesive devices. The fifth ESP lesson I learned is don't assume that what you learned 10 or 15 years ago is still the prevailing or accepted practice. If you are

teaching business writing, get some authentic letters, faxes, and memos, and base your teaching on them. Also keep in mind that many companies have their own preferred formatting styles for all types of correspondence. Therefore, instead of asking students to memorize one style of memo or letter, a more valuable skill would be to teach them to read a style sheet and follow formatting instructions for various styles of business correspondence and documentation.

Conclusion

As you can see, I have learned a lot during my ESP career. The most important lessons have been the following:

- ESP is not teaching lists of technical vocabulary.
- Assumptions and intuition about language use in ESP situations are probably inaccurate.
- Needs analysis should include observations of the language use in context.
- Materials should be appropriate and authentic.

As ESP professionals, we must be prepared to find out how language is used in real world situations and teach that language. Knowledge of discourse and genre analysis is crucial for us. We must be ready to develop courses that teach authentic language from many different fields, based on accurate needs analysis and appropriate materials and methodologies. We must acknowledge the fact that much of the language that our students need will not be found in any course books or pre-packaged materials; therefore, we must be willing and able to prepare our own. Naturally, to prepare ourselves to do all of this, we must take advantage of training and professional development opportunities in ESP, and we should rely on the expertise of more experienced colleagues.

So, what is English for Specific Purposes? At this stage in my career, my answer is this: ESP is English instruction based on actual and immediate needs of learners who have to successfully perform real-life tasks unrelated to merely passing an English class or exam. ESP is needs based and task oriented. Teaching ESP is demanding, time consuming, and different for every group of students. ESP is a challenge for all who teach it, and it offers virtually unlimited opportunities for professional growth. I encourage other ESP practitioners to contribute their answers to the question, "What is ESP?"

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