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The question of audience

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The material has been rearranged. A detailed example of coping with postgraduates is provided. The distinction between general and specialised language has been clarified.

Introduction

With my MA classes on ESP, After discussing the two mountains, I usually go on to discuss the question of audiences and players on the ESP scene. Each of these groups has a different background, and a different expectation of language learning. These can be roughly identified as:

1. Secondary school students
2. Undergraduate students and those in technical or non-university settings
3. Postgraduate students, or adults learning English for their job
4. Teachers
5. Administrators

What follows is vastly over-simplified and over-generalised. The points made are best used as a list for discussion: to what extent do they apply to you and your circumstances? In my context the language of science is French, therefore instead of referring English as L2 and French as L1 I have kept the original language names. Readers are asked to make mental changes to adapt this to their local situation. Some of these points will be developed elsewhere in the lectures.

1. Secondary school students

Usually ESP as a field is considered as applying to adults. There are some schools where science is taught in a second language (usually English, but it could be French, Spanish, or even Classical Arabic). In my own research, I studied the teaching of science in English in a country where it was normally taught in French. I have not seen ESP material that considers seriously the teaching of Science in English in the English immersion schools in French speaking Canada for instance. The field of ESP usually quietly ignores these areas of linguistics.

2. Undergraduate students and those in technical or non-university settings

Some like to draw a distinction between English for Academic Purposes - university use, with accompanying work on writing essays and other such academic genres, and English for Occupational Purposes, where English is taken into the real market place, and can include training groups of people such as factory workers and secretaries. I see this as an emphasis rather than a distinct break between two groups.

a. The strong points of the undergraduate are

- 1) Increasingly, coming to university with a higher command of general English. This is not always true. Weak students can be as low as 'upper beginners' (A2) and the best students, such as students of medicine and engineering, can be approaching upper intermediate (B2).
- 2) Should be motivated to study the degree, because they have chosen this discipline, rather than having to study a wide range of subjects, as in schools.

b. The weak points of the undergraduate are

- 1) deferred motivation (see below)
- 2) lack of time
- 3) mixed ability classes
- 4) little sense of history and philosophy of science
- 5) French view of science
- 6) poor grasp of connectives in English
- 7) cannot verbalise symbols in English
- 8) science tends to be viewed rather simplistically as only a body of knowledge to be learnt

3. The postgraduate

a. The strong points of the postgraduate are

- 1) high, immediate, motivation
- 2) good/expert knowledge of the subject, and discourse conventions, in French
- 3) knows full well what is fact and what is in the process of being established as fact
- 4) usually know what they want

b. The weak points of the postgraduate are

- 1) general English has been forgotten
- 2) unrealistic expectations about the speed a language can be learnt
- 3) possibly over-optimistic in how much they think they understand when they read
- 4) poor knowledge of specialist connectives in English

c. Commentary

The story below shows how I once faced a group of professionals, and, in the local language French, before I started teaching, faced them up with the realities I knew so well. Lessons are a lot easier when teacher and student expectations are similar. Time spent negotiating an agreement is time well spent.

I was once asked to teach English to a special class of University teachers. We met on Wednesday afternoons. There was a small group, from the departments of History, Geography, and Philosophy. I knew their weak points, and I knew that my colleagues needed to face up to them and acknowledge them, otherwise there would be a severe clash of expectations. So, in the first lesson, we held a discussion. The discussion went something like this.

Teacher (T): What do you want to do?

Student (S1): I want to read articles in geography

S2: No, I want to read articles in history

S3: And I want to read about philosophy

T: So you want it to be mainly a reading course.

S: Yes, mainly reading, and some speaking

T: How many lessons are we planning?

S: Well, during term time

T: And during the exam season?

S: Oh no, not during the exams, we will be too busy

T: And how long shall we study, a full two hours?

S: Oh no, I want to go home early, an hour and a half should do

T: In that case, we will not take a break in the middle.

S: OK

T: And how much homework are you willing to do? Five hours? Ten hours? None at all?

S: Oh no, no homework.

T: And what do you think your level is?

S: Well, reading is pretty easy in English, there is not much difference to French. Intermediate level I think.

At this point I made some suggestions. By now it was obvious that the time available was short, therefore we could not do anything too ambitious. I reminded them of what they as lecturers should have known very well - it is easier to re-learn, to re-activate, knowledge they already have, than to attempt to learn something new. Therefore the focus of the lessons would be to reactivate the English they once knew.

I did not want to continually have discussions about the content of the class. Therefore I proposed a trial of four lessons, and at the end we would review it and make some changes. I proposed to attempt material from two different levels. I chose the series of graded textbooks called Headway, which was readily available locally. They would try the different levels then tell me which one they preferred. Headway also had an abundance of exercises, and we would be selective.

4. The teacher

a. Your strong points are:

- 1) general English competence
- 2) wider culture, including moral issues
- 3) you have time to learn, and are potentially highly motivated to overcome your weak points
- 4) committed to being a lifelong learner

b. Your weak points are

- 1) fear of science, prejudice against
- 2) inaccurate perceptions of the language of science
- 3) limited teaching and course design experience/training
- 4) do not know how to verbalise the symbols in science, and may find this a problem even in French
- 5) unfamiliarity with science in French
- 6) unfamiliarity with science in English
- 7) unfamiliarity with the history, philosophy, and logic of science
- 8) limited knowledge of the vocabulary of science
- 9) limited knowledge of specialist use of connectives, both in French AND English
- 10) classes tend to be large, and mixed ability, and few hours

c. Commentary

Some of the points above will be dealt with elsewhere. Here I want to challenge ESP teachers to make a firm commitment to being lifelong learners. It is all too easy to lose your English once you leave university. Or you get a job in a remote city. Maybe you do not know how to use the internet effectively. Maybe you are appointed to work in a department where you know nothing about the degrees taken by your students. It is the responsibility of the teacher to go out and teach themselves.

Good teachers must be examples of good learners. They must maintain a curiosity and an enthusiasm to learn more, to find out, and to teach themselves. In fact, it can be categorically stated that any teacher who is not habitually learning, is not a good teacher, and is not behaving professionally. In all honesty, teachers who do not like learning should face up to their own reality and leave the profession.

5. The administration

The administration, or the employer, can have an important role in what is taught and how. In some situations the teacher will just be given the classes and told to teach them English, or, more likely, Specific English (English for the degree discipline). Sometimes they will even allocate students to classes, with no regard to ability level of the students. Commonly, in the timetable planning, English teaching will be given the lowest priority.

Administrators often have a simplified expectation of what should be taught. For instance, medical undergraduates are supposed to be taught medical English, or even, just to read medical English. Yet, these undergraduates, while being beyond the Baccalaureate, will still have a low professional knowledge of medicine, and be

unprepared to discuss subjects like the doctor-patient relationship. Just as important, their level of English may well be too low for them to cope with anything more than a simplified text in English. And we all know that to teach reading to the total exclusion of speaking writing and listening is counterproductive. It is basic TEFL, which I think does not need referencing here, that the skills are interdependent.

Therefore, large classes, with a wide range of ability in them, at inconvenient times, are normal in ESP teaching.

While teaching adults does mean less problems of discipline compared to teaching teenagers, these additional challenges are huge in their own right, and have to be faced.

6. Deferred motivation

A well known problem in teaching undergraduates is that of deferred motivation. Often students arrive with lower intermediate level English, and they have no obvious need to make progress in English. Everything they study is in French or Arabic, and none of the subject lectures or readings given by subject specialists are in English. Obviously, students prioritise, and English goes to the bottom of the list. Students know they need English, but not immediately. They think they need it later, when they leave university.

What happens then? Students tend to live in the immediate; they live for the next test or examination. Even with examinations 2-3 times a year, it is rare to see a student do any revision until the week or days before the examinations. They defer revising until they absolutely must revise. How much more so English. They will put off studying the language seriously.

Undergraduates are not so different to my students for an MA in English. Most of them put off thinking about a research proposal until they are sure they have passed their examinations at the end of the first semester. The trouble is, that by the time they have finalised the proposal, in late spring, the window of opportunity for collecting data from students has passed. Any type of research involving a study of students cannot be done in the vacations, or around examination time. Effectively, in Tunisia, there are certain narrow windows, roughly Oct-Dec, and Feb-March. If MA students do are not ready to go in February, they will have to wait until October, seriously setting them back. But, since there is a failure rate in the examinations, the motivation to write a research proposal is 'deferred'.

In addition, the English teacher may well be under the expectation to give a reasonably high mark. Afterall, why should a student fail, just on the least important subject? So students often do not have the incentive of a bad mark in English to encourage them to take it seriously.

What then are some possible answers? The first priority is to persuade some subject teachers to include some English readings in their bibliographies of compulsory reading. This then shows students that subject teachers value English. There is nothing like the motivation of learning content through English for motivating the study of English.

The ideal of course, is to persuade one of the subject teachers to do their course partly or entirely in English.

7. Balancing various loyalties

A teacher has to be loyal to his employer, the students, what is known to be best teaching practice, and to himself. Sometimes, getting the balance right is not easy. Some possible solutions to the tensions are dealt with below.

a. The expectation that ESP classes should focus on one skill, such as reading

It is not my intention here to review the evidence that a multi-skilled integrated course is usually the best approach. Most ESP and TEFL teachers would argue that reading skills are improved by good speaking and good writing skills, ie that the skills are inter-related. But some administrators have different expectations. Ultimately the teacher must bow to the wishes of the employer. But it may be possible to follow a more integrated approach, provided there is an obvious emphasis on the desired skill such as reading.

b. The expectation that texts in the speciality should be used

Particularly for intermediate students, the foundations in general English need to be laid. But employer and student expectations usually mean that texts within the speciality need choosing. The solution here is to recognise that the words ‘general’ and ‘specialised’ have two distinct meanings.

Table to show the different senses of ‘general’ and ‘specialised’		
	Popular senses	Technical senses
general	<p>1. a wide range of general interest topics of general knowledge, such as sport, hobbies etc Suggested term: general topics English</p>	<p>2. Basic English, of all kinds, from pronunciation, through vocabulary, to discourse patterns such as those used in a newspaper. Suggested terms: foundational English basic English</p>
specialised	<p>3. a wide range of topics within the speciality of the student. Suggested term: specialised topics English</p>	<p>4. Advanced English, the fine points, and the vocabulary and discourse patterns specific to the discipline. Suggested term: technical English advanced English</p>

When I think of ‘general English’ I am usually thinking of box 2. I have been in meetings where I noticed that most people were using the term in the popular sense of box 1. In order to maintain the needed distinctions, I have therefore provided alternatives above.

There is also a problem of logic. Most people assume the following:

basic English (always and only) = general interest English

specialised English (always and only) = advanced English

In other words, foundational English is always and only expressed in general English texts. Foundational English can never be used for specialised subjects. Similarly, Advanced English is used only for specialised subjects, and is never used for general interest subjects.

I submit, this is to commit an error known as a category error. Language and topics are completely distinct and largely unrelated. Thus topics can be general interest or specialised. Language can be basic or advanced.

General interest topics can be expressed in basic or advanced English.

Specialised topics can be expressed in basic or advanced English

Or to put it another way:

Basic English can be used for general interest topics

Basic English can be used for specialised topics

Technical English can be used for general interest topics

Technical English can be used for specialised topics

8. What does this mean for the ESP teacher?

Few classes in ESP are ready for advanced English. But this does not mean the teacher must use general interest texts. For most classes, it means teaching foundational English (box 2) through the means of topics within the speciality (box 3). And the ESP teacher of today has a much greater supply of ‘**basic specialised**’ texts. They always had journalistic sources in which complicated topics (complicated in terms of both the ideas, and the language) are expressed simply - for the lay reader. But in the last few years there has been an explosion of new genres - written, audio, and video, such as blogs, podcasts, and vodcasts (video podcasts, often with subtitling) which are authentic in the sense that they are produced without language learners in mind, in which the language is not too difficult. It may take some work to find material suitable for the classroom, and it may not always be there, but, the variety and the possibilities are greater than ever.

ESP teachers must never forget that specialised subjects build on foundational English. Take the subject of vocabulary for instance. It has been well documented that even in

specialised texts, over 80% of the words come from only 2000 word families. See for instance <http://www.uefap.com/vocab/vocfram.htm>. This means that it is possible to teach basic English even with some advanced texts, especially if students and teachers are comfortable with extracting information and learning from authentic demanding texts without necessarily understanding all the language.

9. How can a language teacher become knowledgeable in other subjects?

I am amazed how often I hear this question, because the answer is so obvious: go out and learn! Teach yourself! Find out!

Here I sometimes find a clash of expectations between my students (trainee teachers) and myself. There is the expectation that teachers will be provided with courses by the inspectors or the system, and that when they are not provided, then it is not the fault of the teachers. At this point I get angry. Part of being an adult, part of being professional, is to take responsibility for one's own learning.

Now I readily acknowledge that we all need help at times. I insist though, **the primary responsibility to learn about another subject rests with the English teacher**. And this responsibility carries with it a price. It will mean effort, time, and even money. Given that libraries are often few and far between and unremarkably equipped, then it is up to the teacher to find suitable material and buy it if necessary. So how can a teacher find out?

One of the objectives of a professional teacher is to establish and maintain good relationships with other colleagues - in this case, not just other teachers of English, but also the subject specialists in the department. Most people like it when someone asks them for advice. Therefore, one idea is to approach the subject specialists, explain how you would like to know about the subject, and asking them what they teach, what readings are suggested, and, what would they suggest to an English teacher to read or do that would help them get some understanding of the subject. Since there will be several subject specialists to ask, this will take some time, and probably you will have to focus on the priority subjects whatever they are.

Another idea is to ask the students for information.

When I wanted to write some material for my teaching on the language of business, I first of all looked for a short summary of the world of business. So I borrowed and summarised a textbook written for those studying for an 'A' level in business studies. This took me 1-2 days of work, but was not that difficult. For science, there are excellent one volume summaries such as that by Isaac Asimov For medicine, the web is awash with information, though less so about the basic sciences such as anatomy physiology and biochemistry. A shortcut here is to read material written for nurses and other non-doctor medical people.

I know an ESP teacher in a faculty of medicine who worked hard at this. He got invited into the anatomy laboratory - yes - human dissection, and later was even able to attend minor surgery along with other clinical students.

You, the ESP teacher, in some ways have the furthest to go. Not only must you climb science mountain, you must then take students to the English side of the mountain. Though it is the same science mountain, the two faces have remarkable differences.

The students look to you, to provide the 'science in English'. To gain their respect, you must become very knowledgeable about what they are learning. This will have benefits all round. You will feel much more confident, both in front of the class, and when relating to other colleagues.

No one expects the English teacher to be a specialist in anything except the English language. But students and colleagues expect the English teacher to take a lively interest in the subjects taught in the department. Time was when an English teacher could be forgiven for not even beginning to understand science. That time has long passed. There is a wealth of material - understandable to the interested non-specialist - and yet accurate and authoritative. This is found on the internet. And nowadays a good English teacher will develop the skills and experience to be able to find such material. Of course, it is often difficult for the non-specialist to decide if the material is credible and reliable or not. There is though a much simpler answer to this problem. The English teacher can easily take examples of sites to the subject specialists and ask them for their opinion. If, perchance, the subject specialist hesitates and does not know (because even today I suspect not every subject specialist is fluent in internet use) then the English teacher will be stimulating the growth of the competence of a subject specialist.

At this point, the ESP teacher starts earning respect - they start becoming helpful, and maybe better informed about what is available on the web than the subject specialist. The ESP teacher starts becoming useful to the subject specialists.