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What is ESP?

Lecture notes, last updated 24 November 2009

1. Introduction

After introducing my course and talking about the two mountains, and the question of audience, I then take a step backwards to some extent, and present the history of ESP, with the views of some authors as to what characterises ESP. This whole subject is based upon Hutchinson and Waters 1987 chapter 1 and can be covered rapidly. There is nothing really new here. The real interest comes in the discussion questions, though the response to them varies enormously from year to year.

2. ESP practitioners need:

- a. training in ways of describing a language
- b. training in teaching language
- c. training in designing language courses
- d. some knowledge of what the students are involved in eg Medicine, business. This is in contrast to EGP teachers, who have no such need. ESP is therefore "dependent for its successful implementation on help and materials from specialists in many other areas of professional activity" (Robinson 1991:1). [EGP = English for General Purposes, otherwise known a little disparagingly as TENOR: Teaching English for No Obvious Reason].

Think: what training have you had? What will you get? What is the hardest for you?

3. The origins of ESP

- a. **The demands of a Brave New World, post WW2**
 - 1) Expansion of science, technology, and economics.
 - 2) Historical reasons led to the dominance of English in science and business.
 - 3) A new generation of learners of English, learning, not just to be cultured, or well educated, but learners who needed English, and knew why they needed it.
 - 4) Particularly in **business**, "time and money constraints created a need for cost effective courses with clearly defined goals" (Hutchinson & Waters 1987:7). English teaching moved out of the traditional educational establishments. English teaching became big business.
 - 5) Teachers of English became more accountable, subject to the needs, wishes, and demands of whoever was paying. English teachers started working not just in educational establishments, but in businesses, where results were expected, and paid for.
- b. **A revolution in linguistics** (see, Growth in ESP)
 - 1) Traditionally: grammar. New emphasis: language in the real world - the so called communicative approach.
 - 2) Language varies according to situation, therefore the distinctive features can be identified, and made the basis of the new courses. In particular, there was some

discussion of the distinctive features of the language of science, and a concentration on these features in lessons.

c. A focus on the learner

- 1) In psychology, emphasis on the learner and their attitudes.
- 2) Hence courses where importance was given 'relevance' to learners needs and interests

4. The ESP tree

Hutchinson and Waters 1987:17 have a picture of a tree with the different branches of language and how they relate together. It is important not to forget the roots of ESP.

a. The diagram is complicated, but the basic distinctions are

- 1) EAP versus English for Occupational Purposes, English for Vocational Purposes, Vocational English as a Second Language
- 2) English according to the nature of the specialism
- 3) ESP versus ELT or EGP

b. ESP is NOT simply a matter of teaching 'specialised varieties' of English

The common English component is usually far greater than the specialised. ESP is NOT specialised vocabulary and grammar. It is NOT much different to other kinds of language teaching and learning.

c. Hutchinson and Waters 1987 see **ESP as an approach not a product**. The approach is based on learner need.

d. **Jordan** has a different perspective, focusing on EAP.

- 1) The foundation is Language skills
- 2) ESP = EAP + EVP et al
- 3) EAP = ESAP (English for specific academic purposes eg medicine) + EGAP (English for General Academic Purposes: usually enhanced subject 'study skills' such as writing, and the formal registers)

[Robinson 1991:3 adds the variable of the degree of expertise of the students in their subject, eg undergraduate medical students are not the same consultants. The undergraduates are struggling with the content of the medical studies, the consultants are struggling to function in another language, but can assume mastery of their field of study.]

5. The utilitarian purpose of ESP

“General” English, is in the context of education for life, culture, and literature. The language itself is the focus, the subject matter, and the purpose of the course. “Specific” English is for students who are learning English as a means to an end, en route to the acquisition of some other knowledge or skills. It is a means to an end, and is utilitarian in purpose.

- a. occupational eg pilots, international telephone operators
- b. vocational eg hotel workers
- c. academic/professional eg engineering, medicine.

6. The ESP course is characterised by (Stevens, in Robinson 1980:12)

- a. restriction: to those basic skills that are needed
- b. selection: of vocabulary, grammar etc
- c. themes and topics: those required, none other
- d. communicative needs: only the ones required by the learner's purposes are included in a course

7. ESP is characterised by (Stevens 1988 in Johns & Dudley-Evans 1991:298)

- a. **absolute:**
 - 1) learner needs centred: focus on the needs of the learner
 - 2) content related to particular disciplines, occupations, activities
 - 3) centred on the language of those disciplines
 - 4) contrasts with General English
- b. **variable**
 - 1) restricted to the language skills to be learned eg reading only
 - 2) not taught according to any preordained methodology (eclectic)
- c. **ESP is:**
 - 1) focused on learner's need, wastes no time
 - 2) relevant to the learner
 - 3) successful in imparting learning
 - 4) more cost-effective than general English

8. The ESP course is characterised by (Robinson 1991:2)

(NB not all ESP courses have all these features)

- a. goal directed
- b. based on a needs analysis
- c. clearly specified time period for the course
- d. adult students
- e. students are not beginners in English
- f. **homogeneous groups.** Care: to what extent homogeneous. Eg all employees in a company may be required to study English, they will have the shared knowledge and values of the company, but have different jobs to do.
- g. may include specialist language,
- h. more important, may include specialist activities

Discussion:

1. What are the origins of ESP in your country?
2. Compare Strevens and Robinson's characteristics
3. Apply the lists to your country.

References

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