

ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES

Edited by R. Mackay & A. Mountford
Longman.

This book is a must for all people concerned with the teaching of English to satisfy real student needs. It consists of a careful selection of the basic and most important articles in this field, in which the personal contribution of the editors is of great importance. The clarity and precision of most of the articles contained in this book have made me think that an appropriate title would also be, ESP for Beginners. By this I do not mean that the book is, in any way, simplistic or superficial, on the contrary, it is intended for all those people already involved or about to be involved with the teaching of English as a means and not as an aim in itself.

The book is divided into three parts: the first part is entitled "The Problem Surveyed." As Candlin states in the preface, it examines the sociological, linguistic, psychological and pedagogic factors that affect the design of ESP materials. The second section deals with approaches to ESP design. This section is of utmost interest to course designers or materials writers. It gives good insight into the development of some of the most popular textbooks in this field e.g. Nucleus by M. Bates and English in Focus by J.P.B. Allen and H.I. Widdowson. Part three presents five different case studies in which a teacher decided to design a syllabus and material to deal with student needs. The first two articles map out the characteristics that distinguish ESP from general English. Ron Mackay and A.J. Mountford's opening article is particularly clear when it compares ESP with the teaching of non-communicative English for adults at evening institutes or to secondary level children. "There, the ELT courses offered are neither cognisant of the learners' maturity nor relevant to their social role". They also insist on the importance of identifying homogenous groups of learners of the foreign language and distinguishing their intended uses of language in particular circumstances. What

also should be considered of great importance is the principle that ESP takes advantage of what the learner already knows.

For many years people involved in some kind of primitive ESP had believed that this approach implied, at least for students of science and technology, word by word translation with the help of a dictionary. The outcome of this method has often been catastrophic. This article deals with this problem and makes a clear distinction between translation and transference of data into the L₁. The article concludes by talking about current perspectives in this field. For example, the interest in ESP has coincided with a renewed interest in discourse analysis and with changes in methodology.

The second article, also written by R. Mackay is a very useful survey of student needs. It is suggested that these types of surveys should consist of more precise ways of gathering information in order to facilitate the handling of the data obtained. It is now considered that a survey should consist of open ended questions which will give qualitative, subjective data and closed questions which will give quantitative, objective data. This is of paramount importance, because, as Candlin states in the preface, "they (the articles) make clear; firstly that ESP should remain loyal to collected rather than invented data".

The second section of these articles presents approaches to ESP textbook design. In this section some theoretical implications of an approach to ESI through the communicative properties of the language are discussed. The discussion involves a detailed account of three textbooks published in recent years. It is said that "these books represent a generalised solution to the problem posed by ESI learning situations, although both Writing Scientific English and Nucleus were originally written to serve the needs of a specific group of learners in the Universities of Libya and Tabriz respectively. In the introduction to this section some features that the three books have in common are summarized. Probably the most important feature is the statement of the dormant competence students should possess in order to successfully carry out a course using any of the three books. A strong objection to the use of any of these books is that they were designed to deal with a specific group of students and with their very special needs. Consequently, these books are aimed at students who need English as a second language. This represents a serious drawback for our students

who have learned English as a foreign language and not as a second language. On the other hand, as far as content is concerned, they are aimed at the same type of students who really possess what can be called a "foreign culture". This is also a serious drawback in terms of motivation for our students who expect to deal with much more interesting content matter than the one contained in these books. Swales in his article, states that they were aware that their students came from a very different culture from that of Western Europe, with its own conventions of formal writing. In another part of the same article he also says: "Decisions about course priorities should be partly based on an assessment of the circumstances under which teacher intervention in the learning process is essential, where it is useful and where it is of marginal advantage".

Bates in his article gives an introduction to Nucleus, its origins and the student needs the book aims at resolving. In this article as well as in the other ones, one can imply that the writer's concern is directed only to the exact sciences or to the biological sciences because very little is said that can be applicable to the social sciences. Another interesting aspect is that Bates says that when writing Nucleus a few of them had past experience of ESP but were handicapped by lack of scientific training. Of course, they remedy their situation by consulting the students about the correctness of the content as very few of the teachers spoke English.

The last part is an account of five different situations in which the teachers decided to try to teach students according to their specific needs instead of giving them a general course in the hope that somehow they would be able to apply some of what they had learned to practical situations. Probably the best adjective that can be applied to learning through ESP is used in the introduction where the courses are referred to as survival courses. It is stated in the preface to this section that the fact that they were written for overseas students living in England, should not detract from their relevance to similar situations abroad. However, extreme care should be taken in not overgeneralizing some of the principles stated in the five articles.

"A Social Survival Syllabus" by R. Straker Cook refers to the ordering of the materials through function and the difficulties which might arise due to the overlap among the functions. He said that the syllabus had to be spiral in nature as some

procedures (functions) are subsumed by others and that once the procedures have been presented and associated with structural features, they will be constantly reincorporated in subsequent units of the syllabus.

At the University of Newcastle R. Mackay and A.J. Mountford developed a program for soil technology scientists. This project is referred to in the second article. It is divided into two parts: the first one deals with general observations about the criteria for the selection and writing of materials and the second part is a description of the reading program they produced.

The third article refers to a listening comprehension course written by J. Morrison at Newcastle University. Here the author explains that he rejected the commercial tapes available in the Language Center because, although useful for "social" English, they were too "structural" in approach to be of much help to postgraduate students whose immediate needs were to successfully cope with their lectures. Morrison also states how he carried out his task: firstly, he identified the relevant spoken discourse; secondly, he identified the features of persistent difficulties and lastly he designed the course itself.

In the next article, N. Jordan explains how he dealt with an ESP program for economists at the University of Manchester. He started by identifying aspects of language which were troublesome for students. The first problem area was that students were not able to understand spoken English when delivered at a normal conversational rate especially informal or colloquial English. This problem included three different aspects: the inability to focus attention on details and overall meaning; the inability to distinguish weak forms; and the inability to recognize the terminology of economics. The next major areas he identified in which the students had problems were: note taking, participation in seminars and writing academic prose.

The last article in this section was written by C.N. Candlin, J.M. Kerkwood and H.M. Moore. It is an account of a three week intensive course for post-graduate students going to England under the aegis of the British Council. What is particularly interesting in this article is the identification of the problem which involved: 1) deciding on the syllabus content, 2) designing a course program, 3) assessing students'

abilities, 4) time and available resource constraints. They strongly emphasized what they called "evaluation of the effectiveness of the course" by saying that it is necessary to take into account the combined effect of all factors in so far as these relate to the final assessment of the students. There is also a magnificent example of how the four levels of meaning i.e. notional, propositional, contextual and pragmatic are conveyed in a text.

To conclude this review, I would like to quote the authors' two principles concerning the identification of the students' needs "1.- close approximation of the type of study setting awaiting the student. 2.- a genuine communicative purpose for the student i.e. a setting in which the participant does not feel himself merely to be playacting future roles (or worse, playacting implausible future roles) but is engaged in using language to communicate what "he" considers worthwhile messages at that particular point in time".

Guillermo Alcalá Rivero
Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana
Xochimilco
May 1978

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