

THE FORUM

TEACHING LANGUAGE FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES: A New Territory for Power Games

The term "English for Specific Purposes" was introduced in Mexico only a few years ago, and has gathered momentum as an alternative to "general English teaching" every year since. No one can say, of course, when the first classes in English for Specific Purposes took place, or when the first teacher, faced with students who wanted to learn English for specific purposes, created materials simultaneously as the course progressed, in order to expedite the learning of English for a specific purpose.

What we are beginning to feel in Mexico, and what prompts me to write this brief plea for certain reconsiderations, is the tendency to make ESP a commercial matter, and the consequent tendency for professional opportunists in the area. While it is natural to see the sequence of supply and demand, it is disconcerting to see that theoretical considerations, methodological suggestions, and material development, are becoming commodities. Even avowed anticapitalists are participating in ESP with a competitive spirit which actually creates markets, for motives which we are forced to question.

The institutionalization of any concept such as ESP is inevitable; its very survival as a new orientation in English teaching depends on the formation of certain organizational structures and networks. Such networks should aid in coordinating experiences, making available the results of research, and sharing ideas, materials and methodologies.

Instead, there is a growing spirit of competition among the key professionals who witnessed the formal entry of ESP in Mexico, and academic issues are diluted with politics. The natural drive for success and power, seen in all fields of endeavor in Western culture, finds the newness and excitement of the ESP area, and the chance to become the proverbial "big fish in a small pond," to be an irresistible temptation.

ESP & Methodology

Theoretical linguists will always be able to afford the luxury of sustaining heated debates among themselves and of developing schools of thought. Applied linguists are in a position to reap the benefits of these divisions, and have the privilege of drawing eclectically from all of the positions.

The teaching of English for specific purposes is different from teaching general English essentially because of its strong goal orientation. This in no way implies a methodology: the ESP teacher must draw from all the latest findings in linguistics, including psycho- and socio-linguistics, in order to apply them to a given situation. Discussions of how to teach reading comprehension or oral competence, to mention two major specific needs of students, should and do take place; but the new power players take either an arrogant position ("there is a best way to teach ESP, and we have found it"), or a scornful one ("there is no way to teach ESP, so why the discussion?"). Of little import to these new experts in the field, is the fact that a given approach which they advocate simply does not work in practice, or that a principle which they have tabooed does work. When faced with these attitudes, often reinforced by skillful name-dropping, the ESP teacher who genuinely wishes to be acquainted with as many alternatives as possible, is made to feel ignorant, irresponsible, and lacking in credentials, when the actual gap of knowledge/experience may lie in another direction.

Materials production in ESP

Probably the most difficult problem in ESP is the need for materials which will concentrate on a particular skill, in a particular major field of study, within particular parameters of a physical nature. All these factors should emerge directly from the constituents of the particular situation, through a formal needs analysis survey.

Experience has proven that the variables in any given ESP situation are usually so complex and different from any other ESP situation, that at best, only parts of one course design could be applied to another. This fact suggests the strong need for cooperation in building up a national resource center, where a list and description of all recently developed materials could be available to all institutions requesting them. Arrangements for the utilization of a given course or part of a course could be made directly between the interested institution and the one which has developed the materials. This would be a means of facilitating the solution to the growing demand for materials, by providing access to the supply without an attached price tag.

Instead, we can observe two attitudes in this area, similar to those seen in the area of methodology, neither of which is constructive or cooperative. The first is the critical stance of disdaining all the new materials which have emerged. This is the easiest position to take, since no written course could ever take into account all the pedagogic implications of the linguistic theories on which they are based. Nor should they necessarily do so; linguists are constantly revealing factors which influence language acquisition, and the only plausible way to deal with this is to create courses which are by very nature flexible, allowing for supplementary components which can be changed as well.

The other tendency, more frequently seen, is to have developed a course and to insist that it is the definitive version in ESP course models. The underlying motive here is obviously that of becoming recognized through publications whose very existence depends on their sales potential. Not that publishing is in itself negative, but the by-products of exclusivity, or criticizing other materials in order to sharpen the advantages of a certain course design, produce an atmosphere which runs counter to our attempts to improve the teaching of English in our various situations. Those who sell their own courses in this way forget that while their materials may be excellent and bring good results in their situations, the very nature of ESP requires that so many specific details be accounted for, that it is highly unlikely that one course will be fully appropriate in two different situations.

To date, published material in ESP has served as a stop-gap in situations which required "relevant" material immediately. Teachers inevitably find themselves patching these courses so extensively, in order to make them suit their particular purposes, that soon the patchwork becomes potential for a new course corresponding more precisely to the students' needs, e.g. the need to be dealing with specific target skills, the hours allowed for programming, scheduling problems, etc.

To take a sceptical position of belittling all courses which have been designed, or to scorn all courses save one's own, reflects an underlying professional jealousy which often as not is a defence for the uncertainty we all feel in embarking on the ESP venture. The relative newness of ESP calls for an attitude of humility in us all, and a willingness to aid the separate efforts to make isolated courses work, by allowing for and encouraging the easy give-and-take of cooperation.

In summary

The negative thread running through the whole issue of ESP can be traced to the tendency to precipitate in seizing the chance to assume expertise in the field. The rush to produce course material and methodologies has been accompanied in many cases by the rush to become known. It is the power game in another of its manifestations: in this case, a relatively easy road to a dubious sort of fame.

There is a growing tendency to exploit seminars and conventions at the national level, as opposed to contributing at the "grass-roots" level of local cooperative efforts. While national cooperative efforts are indubitably of great benefit to all, the added element of power players who take advantage of these encounters to arrange/impose interchanges for their own interests represents an input which detracts from the high level of professionalism anticipated by all who attend.

In fact, to date we really can't speak of experts in ESP in Mexico: we are teachers of ESP from varying backgrounds with different degrees of experience. Institutions with no former experience become aware of their own need for an ESP program because the students demand it, in one way or another. These institutions should be able to take advantage of former experiences by consulting a register (national resource center?) in which all ESP programs in Mexico are briefly described, and by contacting those places which have programs relating in some way to the projected one, in order to observe the working models.

What is most disturbing about the spirit of the power players, is that they lose sight of the final goal, the student, and of our desire as educators to set up situations which encourage successful and efficient learning processes, given the variables of each situation. We are accustomed to the phenomenon of students' needs serving the interests of professionals' needs in all institutionalized education, yet for this to be repeated in ESP is most ironic, since by definition we are dealing with programs which emerge from and must maintain a strong relationship with the students and their expressed needs. To depart from this and be more concerned with the fame of X institution, or to flaunt the possession of the key to the ivory tower of ESP expertise, is a gross error, and an insult to the students, as well as to the personnel of the schools being assaulted with "information" from the new self-appointed ESP consultants.

Ruth Bergman
Universidad Metropolitana
Azcápolzalco

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