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A parallel approach to ESAP teaching

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Abstract

It is fair to say that English language teaching has always been teaching for special purposes, however since the 1960's, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has grown to become one of the most important areas of English as a Second Language (ESL). Consequently there has been a notable increase in courses, materials and methodologies. However, despite its reasonably long history the ESP community doesn't seem to have a clear idea of what ESP means. This paper aims to examine the teaching of (ESP) in the tertiary level of the education system. It will consider the emergence of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and how this approach gave way to other approaches, focusing on English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP). The paper will also consider factors of the local context; the students, the institution and issues related to the academic discipline and to assess to what extent these factors impinge upon methodologies, course design and classroom activities. In doing so I intend to describe and exemplify a pragmatic approach, which I call a parallel course approach, to teaching English for Special Academic Purposes and discuss the rationale for and nature of such an approach.

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1. Introduction

It is fair to say that English language teaching has always been teaching for specific purposes, however since the 1990's the branch of English language teaching (ELT) known as English for Specific Purposes (ESP), has

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grown to become one of the most important areas of ELT today. English has achieved a global language status in many diverse social and economic areas and this phenomenon has made it imperative that many non-English speaking countries develop English language proficiency in their own citizens. However, despite its long history the ESP community hasn't been able to agree on what teaching ESP involves. For Hutchinson the difference between ESP and general English courses is; "in theory nothing, in practice a great deal" (Hutchinson and Waters 1987:53). Dudley-Evans and St John attempted to classify the events and actions, which typify ESP into 3 stable, absolute characteristics and 5 variable characteristics. The absolute characteristics are:

1. ESP is defined to meet specific needs of the learners
 2. ESP makes use of underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves
 3. ESP is centered on the language appropriate to these activities in terms of grammar, lexis, register, study skills, discourse and genre.
- (Dudley-Evans & St John 1998:4-5)

ESP concentrates on language as it is typically used in specific contexts rather than on teaching grammar and language structures per se. Traditionally ESP courses cater for learners who are learning the language in order to communicate a set of professional skills or to perform particular job-related functions. Genre analysis has brought an increased awareness of the importance of this socio-rhetorical context of language use (see Swales (1990) Bahtia 1993). Therefore ESP practice and the linguistic content of ESP courses varies from one context to another (Benesch 2001:x). Traditionally specific content knowledge is assumed present in the students' existing knowledge and that this provides them with the context they need to understand the English presented in the classroom. Learners are also assumed to be highly motivated. Therefore, "ESP is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner's reason for learning" (Hutchinson and Waters 1987:19). These reasons for learning and the language skills necessary to successfully achieve the learners' goals are established by means of a needs analysis, a fundamental aspect of a traditional ESP approach and the syllabus is created from the needs analysis. For Dudley-Evans the key questions are:

- 1 What do students need to do with English?
 - 2 Which of the skills do they need to master and how well?
 - 3 Which genres do they need to master either for comprehension or production purposes?
- (Dudley-Evans 2001)

2 The emergence of ESAP

English for Academic Purposes (EAP) emerged from ESP mainly due to large increases in the number of foreign students entering universities in English speaking countries and universities based outside English speaking countries which began to offer courses taught in English in order to attract the large flux of students, caused mainly by mass migrations to the US and Canada and in Europe, in large part, due to the Bologna Process, which in 2010 put in motion a series of reforms to make European Higher Education more compatible and comparable, more competitive and more attractive for Europeans and for students and scholars from other continents. Recognition of qualifications and study abroad is achieved by means of the The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) which was introduced in 1989, within the framework of the Erasmus / Socrates programme, and over 3 million students have participated since its inception. This led to notable increases in courses, materials, methodologies and course-books, aimed at specific disciplines such as, English for engineering, English for nursing and even, more recently, English for job-hunting.

Traditionally EAP practitioners and researchers didn't raise concerns about the relationship of EAP courses to the official curricula, pedagogy and student assessment of the institution, as it assumed its role to be to prepare students by focussing on the skills required for their future study needs. To do this the EAP practitioner first needed to carry out a "target situation analysis" in order to identify the communicative needs of the students for their specific academic context with the expectation that the EAP class would facilitate student understanding of the course content when taught in English. It is "the portion of the curriculum which prepares students for gainful involvement in study situations". (Anthony 1997:56). Criticism of this approach led to EAP being seen as a "service course", to the official academic course (Benesch 2001:115). EAP placed less emphasis on research and theory and

more on course planning and instruction and this focus on syllabus design, instruction and teaching materials, over research and theory, allowed EAP to “become increasingly responsive to the complexities of institutions, teaching, and learning in local contexts” (Benesch 2001:4). However for many researchers and practitioners EAP was and is still a “contested field” (Benesch 2001:34).

Carlin (2005) identifies 2 sub-divisions of EAP; English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP, sometimes referred to as a common-core approach) which involves the acquisition of general academic language, as well as study skills including strategies for reading, writing, speaking and listening effectively, skills which are seen as a “key component of EAP” (Jordan 1989:88). And English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP, sometimes referred to as a subject-specific approach). ESAP focuses the learners on language skills specific to a particular subject of study, “ESAP emphasises higher order skills, student development, and authentic text and features while working within specific epistemological traditions associated with different disciplines” (Enongene 2013:59). This aspect of specificity is a determining factor in ESAP course design and content (Hyland 2006 9-12).

3.1 The instructional context

As Benesch points out EAP is “situated” and therefore requires a “context-sensitive curricula” (Benesch 2001:21). Being sensitive to context involves consideration of the students, the institution and issues related to the academic discipline itself, and how these might impinge upon methodologies, course design and classroom activities. In the tertiary level of education foreign language teaching in non-language faculties has undergone changes, which have led to a downgrading in status or importance of the language. This may well be a consequence of universities having to respond to government public spending cuts, or unilateral policy decisions at university or faculty level. This ‘downgrading’ manifests itself in many ways, such as; the reduction of the number of university credits allocated to foreign languages and therefore a reduction in the number of classroom contact hours. Students come to expect their EAP course to provide a “quick and economical use of the English language to pursue a course of academic study” (Coffey 1984: 3). This is true also in learning situations where the course subjects are not taught in English and the EAP course is a module whose value is that it contributes to the accumulation of university credits and the successful completion of a course of academic study. The ‘downgrading’ of EAP in tertiary education may also be due to what Turner calls a “short-cut mentality”, where the idea that ‘time is money’, takes precedence over the belief that time is an intellectual investment (Turner 2004: 96). This attitude seems set to prevail as universities struggle to function with increasingly limited financial resources. However, this short-cut approach radically underestimates the time it takes to really achieve proficiency in a second language and provides our practitioner with enormous challenges.

3.2 The instructional context – the institution

Institutional factors, such as available facilities, classroom space, timetabling and the relationship of the language course to its immediate, discipline-specific environment, will impinge upon and limit the practitioner’s choice of objectives, course content, methods of instruction and his/her ability to assess and accommodate learners’ needs. (see Dudley-Evans, St John (1998) and Hutchison and Waters (1987)). It is also rare that students’ needs can be established by collaborating with the discipline specialists. Despite the fact that many papers on ESP relate collaborations between the discipline specialists and the ESP practitioner, in my experience it is not easy to involve the subject specialists in the English language programme design, content or application, no doubt, as Hyland points out, for reasons of time and opportunity, rather than volition (Hyland 2006:11-12). However it can also be a consequence of the widely accepted opinion that ESAP is simply a mapping of English onto already existing cognitive structures, a notion which has been rigorously challenged, notably by Robinson (1980) and Swales (1988). This “essentialist view of language in which language is understood to be a decontextualized skill that can be taught in isolation from the production of meaning” is behind lack of cooperation between content and language specialists (Zamel 1998: 253).

3.3 The instructional context - students

In tertiary education, the groups of learners are often large in number, are typically composed of students

with differences in linguistic capabilities, general and discipline-specific knowledge, age, personal motivation, attendance levels, differences in self-perceived needs and both long-term and short-term objectives. The students are also likely to come from a variety of social and ethnic backgrounds, including visiting students on international exchange, study programmes, students from overseas benefitting from tertiary courses not available in their home country, or second or third generation members of immigrant communities, thereby providing an environment which is culturally, socially and linguistically diverse. These “variations in language level, prior education and work experience can be accommodating only to a certain extent” (Gatehouse 2001).

3.4 The instructional context – linguistic considerations

The assumption that language skills can be gained easily and quickly has in part been created and maintained by years of commercial activity aimed at selling language courses, methods, materials and exams. It is perhaps pertinent that today the fastest growing area for commercial language proficiency tests is in ESP. There is therefore a growing demand for easily measurable and easily processed language tests. In the tertiary system, these tests are often mapped onto existing university criteria, as pre-requisites for entry to university courses, or as equivalents to university credits in a second language, thereby substituting or competing with internal university tests and exams which were previously part of the professional domain of the institution and the ESAP practitioner. ESAP courses are typified by having a focus on subject-specific language skills (Hyland 2006: 9-12), however external exams, with the commercial need to be as widely applicable as possible, *underspecify* the complexity of language skills and the variety and range of vocabulary typically present in subject-specific texts and fail to give students a sense of what Johns calls a “socio-literate perspective”, a perspective that emphasises the specific social purposes of texts, writer and reader roles, and contexts (Johns 1997:14). As Turner points out, “this failure to see that language grows with content leads to the insidious perception that measured language proficiency is all there is to the role of language on a degree course” and can distort students’ perceptions of what is entailed in really knowing a language and the discourses of a specific academic discipline (Turner 2004: 97).

4.1 Creating a parallel course

Hyland points out that “principled teaching is not about pre-packaged methodological products” (Hyland 2006:89). The ESAP practitioner needs to reclaim his/her role in setting objectives and designing course content and be wary and sceptical of ‘short cut’ pre-packed methods and activities. As we have seen, the constraints of the local context on the course lead to a pragmatic orientation to ESAP teaching (see Halliday 1994) and curricular decisions are “underpinned by a sensitivity to the contexts of teaching” (Hyland 2006:30). There is therefore a great need for pragmatism on the part of the ESAP practitioner and a keen awareness of the limits the local context set upon the effective teaching and learning processes. For this reason, we argue that an ESAP course should run parallel to the subject-specific course as much as possible, but maintain its own integrity as a course in its own right.

4.2 Creating a parallel course - needs analysis

While Dudley-Evans & Johns (1998) division of ESP into absolute and variable characteristics can be helpful in resolving abstract arguments about what is and is not ESP, it is debatable how useful such a check-list is if we apply it to many ESP teaching/learning contexts, we are often in “unchartered land” (Hutchison and Waters 1987:158). This seems particularly true for the role of the needs analysis, which for most researchers is “the cornerstone” (Dudley-Evans and St. Johns 1998:122), “the starting point” (Jordan 1997:22) of course design. Some researchers question the motives behind institutionalised needs analyses, stating that the needs’ assessments carried out and the subsequent courses offered, have less to do with teaching and learning and more to do with institutional issues such as time, numbers of students, timetabling and rooms and money, obtaining the “maximum throughput of students with minimum attainment levels in the language in the shortest possible time” (Turner 2004: 96). Linguists agree that the definition of the term ‘need’ itself would vary depending on who was making the judgment; teachers, learners or administrators. A parallel course approach accepts that learners’ needs are “the central element of EAP course design” (Hyland 2006:73), but places the ESAP practitioner in the role making the initial assessment of what these needs are likely to be. This assessment evolves as the course evolves and classroom practices are validated through a constant process of reflection and evaluation by the EAP practitioner (see Nunan 1987:13).

4.3 Creating a parallel course - ESAP practitioner researcher / knower

Examples found in the EAP literature of collaborative projects involving the EAP practitioner and the subject specialist are context specific and not necessarily transferable to other situations. As Benesch points out, “I do not think the results of my experiments are transferable to other settings” (Benesch 2001:133). Therefore the ESAP practitioner needs to construct context-specific frameworks, which allow him or her to select and combine compatible teaching procedures and materials for the local context (see Hyland 2006). The parallel course allows the ESAP practitioner to choose materials, which reflect and follow the discipline-specific course content, and design tasks, which focus on the lexico-grammatical, and textual features typically found in the subjects’ discourses, in order to help students process such texts. Therefore in the absence of collaboration the ESAP practitioner is required to become self-taught in the discipline’s knowledge’s and discourses, although as Spack points out, “It seems that only the rare individual teacher can learn another discipline” (Spack 1988:100). Realistically, the ESAP practitioner is not likely to become a specialist in the target discipline, or indeed, were he or she to develop some degree of specialisation, is unlikely to be regarded as such by colleagues teaching the discipline or by the students. There is often no suitable ESP coursebook, which can help with course content, Jones in fact asks whether ESP course books really exist (see Jones 1990). The ESAP practitioner therefore needs to research the discipline as much as is reasonable to expect; to become a ‘knower’ of at least some of the discipline’s knowledge sources.

4.4 Creating a parallel course - ESAP practitioner as course designer and materials provider

Often “ESAP teachers find themselves in a situation where they are expected to produce a course that exactly matches the needs of a group of learners, but are expected to do so with no, or very limited, preparation time” (Johns 1990:91). Or, produce a course that is expected to match the expectations and/or needs of the institution. However, I disagree that designing syllabi to support content course goals positions the ESAP practitioner in an anti-intellectual role’ Benesch (2001:79) or a subservient role. By creating a parallel course the ESAP practitioner positions him/herself as an active intellectual with clear curricular goals which ‘extend beyond merely propping up content courses’ (Benesch 2001: 84). So ESAP practitioners use their abilities to ‘explore academic worlds: their language; their genres; their values, and their literacies, remembering at all times that these worlds are complex and evolving, conflicted and messy’ (Johns 1997:154). Specialist language teaching needs to have language as its centrality, “especially in written form” (Turner 2004: 95), the ESAP practitioner therefore needs to research the discipline’s discourses until he/she finds a source which is;

- suitable in the light of the constraints of the instructional context
- readily available for both teachers and students
- an authentic example of one of the discipline’s genres, in order to provide repeated “exposure to real language and its use in its own community” (Kilickaya 2004).

This will provide exposure to the discourse features typically employed in communicating the disciplines knowledge and values, what Swales refers to as “prototypical examples of relevant genres” (Swales 1990:215). Authentic texts are an essential aspect of an ESAP course having a central role as “genre models” (Hyland 2006:97). Guariento & Morley state that for students, extracting real information from authentic texts in a new/different language can be extremely motivating (Guariento & Morley 2001:347). Texts can be found in the target subject course programme itself, but while English teachers can use the materials of the discipline course with which they are linked, they cannot teach them as the discipline course might expect. The ESAP parallel course needs to focus on providing, appropriate, interesting and challenging materials. As Callahan points out “Exposure to domain-specific language facilitates content-area understanding” (Callahan 2005:306). It is widely agreed that the most effective means of teaching language learners with academic needs is through content-based instruction (see Grabe 2009).

So, the burden of selection of texts and design of classroom activities for the parallel course falls upon the ESAP practitioner. Involving learners in the choice of subject matter is unrealistic in terms of their normal educational experiences where pre-determined syllabi are the norm and in terms of the limitations placed on the ESAP course as outlined above (see Horowitz (1986a), Hutchison and Waters (1987)). Teachers need to act

unilaterally when it comes to materials choice and design, as Benesch points out, “EAP teachers have institutional, social, and pedagogical perspectives, allowing them to make considered curricular judgements” Benesch (2001:80).

4.5 Creating a parallel course – course content

Having chosen the subject-specific text and analysed it for the typically recurring lexico-grammatical and textual discourse features employed in the genre, the ESAP practitioner needs to design exercises and tasks on and around the text in order to highlight and provide practice in these linguistic features and how they are employed to communicate the discipline’s knowledge, ideas and values. The “teaching of rhetoric cannot be divorced from the teaching of content” (Spack 1988:103) and the chosen texts should not only allow the ESAP practitioner to help students become familiar with the sub-genre’s typically recurring discourse features, but also help to develop and reinforce content knowledge. The challenging nature of the texts is essential, as “the focus on language is more committed when the content is intellectually stimulating” (Turner 2004:105). The discipline specific texts provide an opportunity for the teacher and student to participate in a rich and challenging dialogue, in this way, instead of transferring knowledge statically, as a fixed possession of the teacher, teacher and students are involved in “the joint act of knowing and re-knowing the object of study” (Shor & Friere 1987:10). By presenting students with intellectually challenging language/content work ESAP practitioners are providing a relevant and intellectually stimulating content background on which the lexico-grammatical and textual features of the discipline’s genres can be foregrounded. These paper-based materials will provide the bulk of the language input to the course and because the course outcomes depend significantly on these materials, they need to relate as closely as possible to the perceived needs of the learners and the course objectives. However as Nuttall warns, “students often complain about the boredom with an unrelieved diet of texts in a single field (e.g. physics) even when it is their professional interest (Nuttall 2005:177). Therefore it will perhaps be necessary to source more than one sub-genre of the discipline’s discourses.

4.6 Creating a parallel course – The practitioner’s role

We have stated above that the approach adopted by the ESAP practitioner is informed by an understanding of the learning/teaching context and as Widdowson points out, in adopting a specific approach the practitioner will also be assigning him/herself a role (Widdowson 1990). The ESAP practitioner therefore needs to re-appraise his/her role in the creation of realistic parallel course aims and objectives. Dudley-Evans and St. John identify five key roles for the ESP practitioner; teacher, evaluator, collaborator, researcher and course designer and materials provider. Taking Dudley-Evans and St. John’s five roles as our template we see that certain roles are more available to the ESAP practitioner than others. (Dudley-Evans and St. John 1998:4-5). An important role for a teacher in any teaching/learning situation is to address motivation, encouraging learners to participate in the classroom activities which are deemed useful for successful learning. Often teachers rely on their interpersonal skills and their relationship with the group in order to do this. This role is not often available due to limiting factors such as; the amount of classroom time allocated, frequency of contact, the physical teaching environment and the large number of students. The ESAP practitioner needs to look to other ways to motivate. One such way is to make the pedagogical decisions transparent; students need to engage in a ‘visible pedagogy’, where the pedagogic rationale for texts and classroom activities is made clear to them and tasks are seen to link clearly to the overarching aim of developing the necessary lexis and reading skills to process discipline-specific texts. The theoretical underpinning of this approach is Vygotsky’s (1978) emphasis on the interactive collaboration between teacher and student with the teacher taking the authoritative role to “scaffold” or support learners as they move towards their potential level of performance.

Ellis (1987:212) suggests that one of the three major roles for a teacher is that of ‘onlooker’, where the teacher withdraws from the scene in favour of student-student activity, or student-task activity is a role which is available and which serves as an opportunity for the ESAP practitioner to monitor students as they interact with the text and activities and as they interact with one another. In this way it’s possible to receive feedback on materials and activities and allows the ESAP practitioner to reflect on his/her practices enabling him/her to better plan the progress of the course. ESAP practitioner’s need the opportunity ‘looking on’ provides in order to reflect on students’ language learning preferences, the different ways a learner acquires and retains information. The role of onlooker/monitor will also allow for the possibility of teacher intervention in order to provide individual feedback

and guidance. This I believe is part of what Boomer calls the “demystification of learning”, included in which is the encouragement of students to ask questions, to speak up when they don’t understand. Boomer goes on to say that this is a way of making students feel that they are not novices in the linguistic practices of the academic discourses, but active members (Boomer 1992:6).

4.7 Creating a parallel course – Student considerations

In the absence of a detailed linguistic needs analysis, and with a layperson’s grounding in the content of the target subject and often without prior knowledge of what has been covered on the course, or perhaps what is involved in detail in the course programme, the ESAP practitioner is often in the dark about what students do, should or need to know. As making sense of a text is an act of interpretation which “depends as much on what we as readers bring to a text as what the author puts into it” (McCarthy 1991: 27), the ESAP course needs to provide opportunities for students to develop and extend areas of background knowledge; their linguistic schemata (their prior linguistic knowledge), formal schemata (their prior knowledge of different text genres and their typical lexicogrammatical and textual discourse features) and content schemata (their subject-specific knowledge). Content schemata allow readers to have a context from which they can process and understand a text (Carrell 2006). ESAP practitioners cannot “assume students’ previous learning experiences will provide the appropriate schemata and skills to meet course demands” (Hyland 2006:17), in fact, “few assumptions can be made about students’ scientific knowledge or their language proficiency” (Starfield 1990:87). Therefore students’ lack of appropriate content schemata can be a major factor in their inability to process subject-specific texts in English and will affect the quality of students’ involvement in classroom tasks (see Allison & Tauroza 1995). The ESAP practitioner needs therefore to make initial assumptions about how much of the discourse’s linguistic, formal and content schemata are present in the learners’ background knowledge, these assumptions will of course be reflected on and revised throughout the progress of the parallel course. Materials and activities would then be designed aimed at activating and developing these schemata. For example, discipline-specific texts are typified by a high density of technical lexis (see Swales 1990:24-26), therefore a substantial part of course and materials’ design will therefore focus on learning and developing subject-specific lexis. Recent studies suggest that focussed vocabulary instruction can have a positive effect on vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension of language students in academic settings (Grabe 2009).

Conclusion

As Benesch says “developing an ethics of EAP requires reckoning with how the field positions itself vis-à-vis institutions, programs, funding agencies, academic classes and students” (Benesch 2001:130). She is not optimistic about change as she would like to see happen, citing financial restraints on especially public funded institutions, growing class sizes, the growth in standardised language testing, and what she calls ‘the speeded-up climate of the information age’, all of which she says, limit the possibility of dialogue and depth of presentation and investigation of language and content (Benesch 2001:133). With so many constraints on the ESAP practitioner the parallel course approach provides what Hyland calls a ‘middle way’ (Hyland 2006:9).

Many researchers stress the need for the ESAP practitioner to reflect on their practice. Pennycook states that “self-criticism is a crucial element” in ESAP teaching, involving “constant questioning about the types of knowledge, theory and practice, or praxis they operate with” (Pennycook 1999:345). Being solely responsible for the creation, activation and outcome of the parallel ESAP course provides the practitioner with the flexibility to cope better with institutional constraints and this flexibility also allows for self-criticism, questioning and change. The parallel course approach reflects the original conception of ESP in that it concentrates on texts, language and activities appropriate to particular disciplines (Halliday et al. 1964). The approach does not presume to teach content in the same way that the discipline specialist would do; the parallel courses use discipline-specific texts and design classroom tasks where language is foregrounded but content remains. Parallel ESAP courses should be a place of intellectual endeavour, where as Turner points out, the language/content dichotomy is no longer seen as language being subordinate to content, but language as constitutive of content (Turner 2004:95). The emphasis is on creating an intellectually challenging and stimulating learning environment where students never lose sight of the purpose of the texts and activities, namely to activate and develop the linguistic skills and content knowledge successfully enough to allow them to better process subject-specific texts.

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