

A LIFETIME OF ENGLISH STUDIES

Essays in honour of Carol Taylor Torsello

edited by Fiona Dalziel, Sara Gesuato and Maria Teresa Musacchio



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TOWARDS A REALISTIC PEDAGOGY FOR ESAP COURSES

Robin Anderson

ABSTRACT In this paper I intend to discuss some of the theoretical and practical implications of the teaching of English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) in the tertiary level of the Italian education system, with specific reference to the teaching of English for business and economics. In doing so, I intend to describe an approach, or more accurately a series of guidelines, which I argue are essential to effective teaching in this specific learning context. I agree with Turner (2004: 95) that specialist language teaching needs to have language as its centrality, “especially in written form”, and that texts need to be intellectually challenging. Consequently, the considerations in the paper refer exclusively to the use of texts in the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classroom.

I. BACKGROUND

It is fair to say that English language teaching has always been and still is, teaching for special purposes; however in the last 20 years there has been such a notable increase in courses, methodologies and coursebooks which have been produced to serve specialist areas of English language teaching that ESP has become one of the most prominent areas of English language teaching today. This growth has been documented by a number of academics, namely, Robinson (1980), Coffey (1984), Strevens (1988), Swales (1988), Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) and Benesch (2001). However there is not always agreement on the definition of what is ESP; for example for Hutchinson the difference between ESP and general English courses is, “in theory nothing, in practice a great deal” (Hutchinson 1987: 53). Dudley Evans and Johns (1998: 4-5), on the other hand, divide the characteristics of ESP into stable, absolute characteristics and variable characteristics:

Absolute Characteristics

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

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3. ESP is centered on the language appropriate to these activities in terms of grammar, lexis, register, study skills, discourse and genre.

Variable Characteristics

1. ESP may be related to or designed for specific disciplines
2. ESP may use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of General English
3. ESP is likely to be designed for adult learners, either at a tertiary level institution or in a professional work situation. It could, however, be for learners at secondary school level
4. ESP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students.
5. Most ESP courses assume some basic knowledge of the language systems.

While this division of ESP into absolute and variable characteristics can be helpful in resolving arguments about what is and is not ESP, it is not particularly helpful when we attempt to apply it to a specific discipline or specific teaching/learning context. If we take the first absolute characteristic, for example, we can concur wholeheartedly with the principle, but in trying to define our learners' needs in our chosen context, the Faculty of Economics in an Italian university, we immediately encounter problems of a practical and logistical nature. In the literature of ESP one encounters definitions and opinions which are often rendered invalid or unhelpful when we try to apply them to real teaching/learning contexts. The following are some examples:

1. ESP assesses needs and integrates motivation, subject matter and content for the teaching of relevant skills.
2. Students approach the study of English through a field that is already known and relevant to them.
3. In ESP it is a needs analysis that determines which language skills are most needed.
4. The teacher can make the most of the students' knowledge of the subject matter, thus helping them learn faster.
5. Learners in ESP classes are aware of the purposes for which they will need to use English.

2. THE GROWTH OF ESAP

English for Academic Purposes (EAP) emerged from ESP as a response, in large part, to changes brought about by globalisation and technologies such as the internet, in which the hegemony of English is apparent. There was also a large increase in the number of foreign students entering universities. In the USA the number of non-native speakers entering higher education increased by over 30% from 1976-1999 (Sager 2002: 1). In Europe, due to greater ease of movement within the European Union (EU) and more specifically student

exchange programmes such as Erasmus (http://ec.europa.eu/education/programmes/mundus/projects/index_en.html), there has also been a notable increase. The European increase has come about also due to the introduction of the Lisbon Recognition Convention which came into force on 01/02/1999 and is the Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education in the EU (<http://europa.eu.int/en/comm/dg22/socrates/ects.html>). This convention allows students to study anywhere within the EU and to gain university credits through The European Credit Transfer System (ECTS): these credits count towards their final degree in their home country (http://www.coe.int/T/DG4/HigherEducation/Resources/Conventions_EN). Moreover, many universities based outside English-speaking countries conduct courses in English.

EAP was later sub-divided into English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP, sometimes referred to as a common-core approach) and English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP, sometimes referred to as a subject-specific approach). EGAP involves the acquisition of general academic language as well as study skills including strategies for reading, writing, speaking and listening effectively for all academic subjects; ESAP involves vocabulary and skills specific to a subject of study, as well as its curriculum (Jordan 1997: 5). The major difference between the two is the extent to which the course focuses on the specific language skills deemed necessary for that discipline. Establishing this level of specificity is therefore essential in order to assess the linguistic needs of the learners and plan course objectives and content. Coffey (1984: 3) suggests that EAP students may need a “quick and economical use of the English language to pursue a course of academic study”. Turner (2004: 96), commenting specifically on overseas students in UK universities, identifies such needs’ assessments as having less to do with teaching and learning and more to do with time and money: “it seems therefore that maximum throughput of students with minimum attainment levels in the language in the shortest possible time was the conceptual framework within which EAP was conceived”.

3. THE PRACTICAL CONSTRAINTS ON ESAP

Turner’s concerns may perhaps be a sad reality for many sectors of higher education today. This may be a consequence of universities having to respond to government spending cuts in higher education, or unilateral policy decisions at university or faculty level. These pressures have not failed to affect the second language departments inside universities, which have undergone some radical changes over the last 15 years, culminating with the most recent educational reforms which have led to the position of English (and other languages)

in non-language faculties being radically downgraded. This is evidenced by the reduction in the number of university credits allocated to languages and therefore a reduction in the number of teaching hours allocated. Turner (2004: 96) refers to a “short-cut mentality”, in which the idea that time is money takes precedence over the belief that time is intellectual investment. This attitude is set to prevail as universities worldwide struggle to function with the increasingly limited financial resources they are allotted. However, this short-cut approach radically underestimates the time it takes to really achieve proficiency in a second language and provides our ESAP practitioner with an enormous challenge.

3.1 *The institutional context*

In order to more clearly describe the practical constraints on the teaching/learning of English in faculties not directly involved in the study of languages, I intend to briefly outline the position of English language teaching in a Faculty of Economics in northern Italy. I am quite certain that the situation described will differ only slightly from other Italian universities. As a result of the recent Italian educational reform, first-level degree students (i.e. undergraduates) are expected to acquire six university credits in English (Legge n. 240/10 del 30 dicembre 2010).

Some degree courses require a second foreign language course which also carries six university credits. Six credits constitute a total of 48 hours classroom time, in the three years of the degree course. The groups of learners are generally large in number, usually over 25 and the groups 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, overseas students benefiting from tertiary courses not available in their home countries and second or third generation members of an immigrant community, thereby providing an environment which is culturally, socially and linguistically diverse.

3.2 *Pedagogical constraints*

With such diverse groups of learners and with the physical and temporal limitations that are part of university life, it is unreasonable to expect that an ESAP practitioner can adequately assess the learning needs of his/her students. Therefore decisions as to course objectives, methodologies and content are

unlikely to be based on an assessment of the learner's reason for learning (see Dudley-Evans, St John 1998; Hutchison, Waters 1987 for a more detailed discussion of this point). Therefore, while accepting that learners' needs are "the central element of EAP course design" (Hyland 2006: 73), we argue that the assessment of those needs and the subsequent course design is more likely to be carried out *unilaterally* by the ESAP practitioner.

The realities of the local context; the students, the facilities, institutional factors and the relationship of the language course to its immediate, discipline-specific environment, are other factors which impinge upon and limit the practitioner's choice of objectives, methods of instruction and course content and materials. I therefore argue that a realistic approach to ESAP is one which necessarily lacks one of the traditional, pedagogical pillars ESP, the formal assessment and accommodation of individual learners' needs. This approach does, however, involve, "the individual teacher's construction of personal, context-specific frameworks which allow him or her to select and combine compatible procedures and materials in systematic ways for a local context" (Hyland 2006: 89).

3.3 *External interference*

There is a general assumption that language skills can be gained easily and quickly. This has been created and maintained, in part, by generations of commercial endeavours to sell language courses, methods and materials. It is not the intention of this paper to enter into the usefulness or otherwise of language proficiency tests, but I suggest that the incredible growth in number and variety of external language proficiency tests has supported this assumption by providing learners with what are essentially superficial levels of achievement. It is perhaps worth pointing out that the fastest growing area for commercial language proficiency tests is in ESP. Today, external tests are being used as pre-requisites for entry to courses, or as equivalents to university credits in a second language, replacing or competing with internal university tests and exams which were previously part of the professional domain of the ESAP practitioner. The growing demand for easily measurable and easily processed language tests, which can then be mapped onto existing university criteria, has infiltrated institutional discourse to the extent where institutions will demand possession of, for example, Cambridge First Certificate, TOEFL or IELTS in order to access or exit courses, without really understanding what these exams mean in terms of the student's real language proficiency. This proliferation of short-cuts also distorts students' perceptions of what is entailed in knowing a second language and what role and use that second language has in their specific discipline.

ESAP courses are typified as having a focus on subject specific language skills (Hyland 2006: 9-12). However, external ESP exams, with their commercial need to be as widely applicable as possible, underspecify the complexity of language issues in the subject-specific context and fail to give students a sense of what Johns (1997) calls a socio-literate perspective, that is a perspective that emphasises the social purposes of texts, writer and reader roles, and contexts. Nor do they provide exposure to the variety and range of vocabulary typically present in subject-specific texts. As Turner (2004: 97) 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".

Sadly, these all too often familiar scenarios are the consequences of the denial of academic respect to ESAP practitioners and their students, while also demonstrating a gross misunderstanding of the nature of language, language learning and the intellectual challenges involved in the acquisition and use of a second language (Swales 1990: 6). Underpinning this suggested approach, is the ESAP practitioner reclaiming his/her role in setting objectives and designing course content, through his/her familiarity with the discourses of the specific discipline.

4. PLANNING AN ESAP COURSE

Discipline-specific discourses are not a single, undifferentiated, body of textual, social and conceptual practices, but a variety of discourses which are identified with the construction and distribution of the discipline's knowledges. The socio-economic setting in which we find these discourses will have consequences for the linguistic and content choices employed by the author(s). As Stubbs (1996: 12) states, "social institutions and text types are mutually defining".

The approach I am outlining in this paper requires the ESAP practitioner to be familiar with how the discipline textualises its views and knowledges, and to research the discipline's discourses until he/she finds a source which is (a) suitable in the light of local context constraints, (b) easily accessible to the students, (c) appropriate in its linguistic and discipline-specific content, (d) intellectually challenging and (e) a valid example of one of the discipline's discourses. As we have seen, the problem is not whether the teaching of language skills can be divorced from the teaching of content, but of how the practitioner can foreground language against the background of subject-specific texts.¹

¹ In class with my university students I generally use *The Financial Times* and *The Economist*, both of which have subscription schemes allowing me, as the ESAP practitioner and later, hopefully the students, to access articles on business and economics on-line.

Texts on specific disciplines in the public domain are more likely to be orientated to an audience consisting of informed members of the discourse community and this will have consequences as to how the writer encodes the information and the degree of technicality or specificity employed, manifested primarily in the writer's lexical choices. I argue that by sourcing and utilising texts from one of the discipline's discourses, the ESAP practitioner is attempting to answer Spack's (1988) question of how far we should go in presenting content information on ESP courses.

This approach therefore involves the ESAP practitioner in a careful choice of the source of subject-specific texts. Such texts can be taken from the course programmes, or other related sources, and in this way the ESAP practitioner provides a relevant and intellectually stimulating content background on which the lexico-grammatical and textual features of the discipline's genres can be foregrounded. The challenging nature of the texts sourced is essential, as "the focus on language is more committed when the content is intellectually stimulating" (Turner 2004: 105).

5. A DICHOTOMY IS NOT A DICHOTOMY WHEN IT IS A HIERARCHY

Along with the search for agreement about the definitions of the various branches of second language teaching/learning (EAP, EGAP, ESAP etc.), the language/content dichotomy is another constant theme in the ESP literature. Very often it is not a dichotomy at all, as in many ESP teaching/learning environments content is deemed more important than language. As an ESAP practitioner, I often encounter what Zamel (1998: 253) calls the "essentialist view of language in which language is understood to be a decontextualised skill that can be taught in isolation from the production of meaning". On more than one occasion the subject specialists I have worked with have felt I had overstepped my area of professional expertise, from language into content. Despite the fact that many papers on ESP relate collaborations between the discipline specialists and the ESP practitioner, in many teaching contexts, this unwillingness to cooperate plus lack of time and opportunity make it difficult to involve the subject specialists in the English language programme (see Hyland 2006: 11-12). The ESAP practitioner is, however, required to become familiar with the discipline's knowledges and discourses, although, as Spack (quoted in Hyland 2006: 111) points out: "it seems that only the rare individual teacher can learn another discipline".

6. TEXTS

I argue that this genre-based pedagogy is essential in developing students' awareness of the discourse features employed to communicate the discipline's information and ideas, and therefore is essential to understanding subject-specific texts. Swales (1990: 13) defines genre as "a recognisable communicative event characterised by a set of communicative purpose(s) identified and mutually understood by the members of the professional or academic community in which it regularly occurs". The discourse community's knowledge claims and language are therefore inextricably linked. By selecting texts from one source of the discipline's discourses, the suggested approach reflects the original conception of ESP in that it concentrates on texts, language and activities appropriate to particular disciplines (Halliday, McIntosh, Strevens 1964). The approach does not presume to teach content in the same way that the discipline specialist would; language is foregrounded, but content remains. By consistently choosing a single source for course texts, the ESAP practitioner provides himself/herself with the opportunity to become familiar with the informational content to complement his/her existing language teaching skills. Together with an awareness of the constraints of the local context and an awareness of likely group needs, our ESAP practitioner is therefore in a position to choose texts and create activities which aim to develop and extend students' language skills while also extending their own knowledge of subject-specific content.

7. LEXIS

One of the requirements for membership of a specific discourse community is "the acquisition of specific lexis" (Swales 1990: 24-26), which consists of words and expressions not expected to be easily understood by non-members of the discipline-specific community. Their frequent use serves not only to maintain and extend the specific-discipline community's knowledge, but also to reinforce and extend the idea of sharedness and a consensus view of the discourse world.

A major objective of an ESAP course is, therefore, to develop the students' range and depth of discipline-specific lexis, by means of focussed pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading activities. In this way, the EAP practitioner helps develop and extend students' technical lexis, enabling them to process discipline-specific texts more efficiently.

8. STUDENTS

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). Readers consciously and unconsciously bring their previously acquired knowledge to bear in processing texts. This previously acquired knowledge includes formal linguistic knowledge and knowledge of content. The student’s formal linguistic knowledge consists of his/her background knowledge of rhetorical structures and of different types of texts, his/her formal schemata or discourse knowledge (see Carrell, Eisterhold 1983). Content schemata can be defined as “the (non-narrative) connections between facts” and “whenever one part of that knowledge is activated, the rest becomes available at the same time and is brought to bear on the task of interpreting the text that provided the activation” (Hoey 2001: 120).

However, we cannot presume that in the local context described above the students will have a wide knowledge of subject-specific texts (Adamson 1992; Sager 2002). In the preparation stage the ESAP practitioner needs to make assumptions about how much of the discourse’s linguistic and informational content will create obstacles to the successful processing of texts and devise activities accordingly.

Teaching in a geology Faculty in the University of Zimbabwe, Love (1991) identified students’ lack of appropriate content schemata as the main reason for their inability to cope with the course textbooks, while Allison (1996) pointed out that the quality of students’ involvement in classroom tasks is determined by their existing discipline knowledge. I agree that ESAP practitioners cannot “assume students’ previous learning experiences will provide appropriate schemata and skills to meet course demands” Hyland (2006: 17). Consequently, ESAP courses need to provide, where necessary, opportunities for students to develop and extend both areas of background knowledge, content and formal schemata, in order to enable students to adequately process discipline-specific texts.

9. CONCLUSION

Our suggested approach to ESAP attempts to realistically accommodate the limiting influences of the local learning/teaching context on the design and implementation of an ESAP course. It involves the use of authentic subject-specific texts in order to provide students with exposure to a valid source of the subject’s discourses, which is stimulating in content and which can be used to highlight and exploit salient discourse features in order to develop the

language skills needed to successfully process texts. The *raison d'être* for the use of authentic subject-specific texts is strengthened by the fact that neither discourse nor content knowledge can be presumed to be present in the background knowledge of the students. In using discipline-specific texts, the ESAP practitioner positions him/herself “as active intellectuals whose curricular goals extend beyond merely propping up content courses” (Benesch 2001: 84). The ESAP class can and should be a place of intellectual endeavour, where the language/content dichotomy is no longer seen as language being subordinate to content, but language as constitutive of content.

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