

The Differences between Syllabuses for English for Special Purposes and Syllabuses for General Purposes

Summary:

This paper is divided into two sections. First of all and in the first section, we will try to point out to what the term English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is used to refer, and then look very briefly at the situation and requirements that led to its emergence. The rest and the main body of the section is devoted to a discussion of how a syllabus catering for the needs of specific group with specific purposes for learning English might differ from English for General Purposes (EGP). Then an attempt is made to point out how such differences could affect teaching materials and techniques by reference to specific group of learners I have in mind and whose needs, purposes for learning English, and other relevant factors are outlined. In the second section, we try to look at some of the arguments raised against teaching ESP rather than EGP. In the meantime, we point out whether these arguments do or do not invalidate the use of ESP in the situation given in this paper. Then, we conclude by assessing the need for a 'specialized' material and a 'specialized' approach to language teaching for specific learners with specific purposes for learning English. At the end, there is a conclusion in which we sum up what has been discussed throughout this paper.

Section 1

Over the past few decades the term ESP has appeared frequently in English language teaching literature. This term -ESP- is used to refer to the teaching of English for specific and utilitarian purpose which is usually defined with reference to three types of requirements: 1- occupational requirement such as for international telephone operators, civil airline pilot etc; 2- vocational training requirement, e. g. for hotel and catering staff, technical trade, etc; 3-academic professional study requirement, e. g.

engineering, medicine, law, etc, (Bates, 1978: 2). Nevertheless, Falvey (1979:19) subsumes both occupational and vocational purposes under one category-vocational purposes. Yet, he thinks that “these categories are not discrete and often overlap extensively” (Ibid); for instance, he adds, a mainly vocational course for an air hostess also includes study skills for academic purposes in order to help her pass a professional catering exam. Similarly, an academic study skills course for a pilot who has to pass professional navigation exam would also include vocational elements to help him develop those communicative skills required to enable him to learn to fly the airplane and to communicate with his crew (Ibid). Any way, he admits that there is a distinction between academic study skills programme of University or Technical Institution and programme of vocational institution or training courses in commerce or industry (Ibid: 19 -20).

The progress in education and the growth of industries (associated with oil) particularly in the Middle East has led to the existence of such developmental academic and training programmes, which often require from their participants a variety of communicative skills in English (Ibid: 20) Hence, the interest in ESP has increased and the EFL (English as a foreign language) market has been flooded with coursebooks for different kinds of ESP, e.g. ESP for engineers, ESP for doctors, ESP for an air hostess and so forth.

This field of English language teaching - ESP seems to possess two important characteristics which are not available to EGP: firstly, its close association with adult learners, and secondly, the important auxiliary role that the English, language is called upon to play in such cases as furthering specialist education or performing a social or working role as scientist, technologist, technician etc., efficiently (Bates, 1978: 2).

The most striking feature of the learners involved in ESP programme is that their need for English is highly instrumentally motivated. It is quite likely that such learners have no wish at all to learn English per se. For ESP learners, English is the means to a very important end; and without English,

their efficiency in their specialism could be restricted. Another important feature unique to the ESP learners is that their needs for English are immediate; they encounter and use English every day in the sphere of their profession or work. Hence, their needs can be well defined in terms of those specific and immediate uses to which the language will be put. So, “in order to design and teach effective course, the teacher and the planner must investigate the uses to which the language will be put.” (Ibid: 21) and they have to keep the students' objective by reference to those uses very clearly in sight.

Now, let us see how a syllabus catering for these needs of such learners might differ from EGP in aim, emphasis and approach. Then, we will try to point out how such differences could affect teaching materials and techniques by reference to specific group of learners I have in mind and whose needs, purposes for learning English and other relevant factors will be outlined.

The primary and essential aim of an ESP course would be to provide the students with the language and techniques they require to pursue their scientific studies or to familiarize themselves with scientific innovation concerning the sphere of their profession or work. In this regard, Widdowson (1979: 40) says: “EST must be centrally concerned with developing the ability to process scientific and technical communication”. An EGP course, on the other hand, would have much wider and general objectives; it regards English, as a “good thing” to learn as a part of a broad education (Bates, 1978: 2). In an EGP course, there is no immediate and specific requirement to use the language in any communicative situation (Ibid); whereas an ESP course would restrict its objectives to the service of the immediate and utilitarian needs of the students. Immediate aims of learning English in an EGP course are defined internally by reference to the requirements of examination irrespective of whether such examinations do or do not reflect the uses of English which the learners will actually require

in their carrier; whereas in an ESP course, aims are defined externally by reference to specific purposes (Widdowson, 1979: 37).

To that end, the ESP syllabus should provide the students with language they can put to immediate, practical uses. Since the students have to utilize English in real-life communication, then their need for being taught language use and not usage is essential. So a concern with ESP entails a concern with communicative competence and use rather than linguistic competence and usage (Ibid). At this point, it is important to emphasize that language learning material that uses the concept of communicative competence “focuses on the purpose to which language is put” (National Extension College Trust Ltd., 1994).

Thus, it is possible for syllabus concerned with specific group learning English for specific purpose to predict fairly accurately what situation the students is likely to encounter and have to cope with. So the ESP will aim to equip them to deal with the conventions of scientific language, reports etc. An EGP syllabus with its wider and general objectives, would not be relevant to the learners with specific purpose for learning English. Hence, we must emphasize that ESP does not dispense with the Needs Analysis which is to be taken into account from the very start and which has as its inputs not only the learner and his target situation but also the findings of the Needs Analysis (Haliday & Cooke 1982: 136).

A difference in aim between ESP and EGP will necessarily result in a difference of emphasis in regard to the skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening. Since ESP entails the creation of a syllabus for specific students with specific communicative needs and since communicative needs can be carried out through all the skills mentioned above and not through listening and speaking only; then ESP course will be concerned with teaching all the skills but with varying degrees of emphasis depending on the nature of the specified communicative needs of the students and on the situation identified with which they are likely to be confronted in the sphere of their profession or work. ESP course will be concerned with teaching.

these skills at the level of communication and not “at a segmental (sentence) syntactic level” as in the case of EGP course (Falvey, 1979: 37). ESP course will be concerned with teaching micro-skills or sub-skills as well and not with teaching macro-skills as in the case of EGP course. These micro-skills are derived from the macro-skills and specified by an analysis of students’ communicative needs (Ibid: 39); for instance, a journalist might not want to write a composition but rather that he might want only to be taught how to write good summaries in English, and a policeman might need training in writing traffic accident report and so on (Ibid). However, though many sub-skills overlap and all are part of the macro skills, “they are distinct skills and need to be viewed as such” (Ibid).

Apart from the difference in emphasis on skills there will also be a difference in emphasis with regard to grammar and vocabulary. ESP course should be concerned with scientific English uses of certain constructions of language (such as the passive, past simple tense, present simple tense, conditionals, imperative, the (-ing) form and the past participle. This would be reflected in the syllabus which would concentrate on these areas. Ewer & Hughes (1971) report how they compared three EGP courses in use in Chile dealing with structures typical of scientific literature and found that there were considerable discrepancies. They report that such structures as those mentioned above, which are essential to the science students, were inadequately dealt with in the school syllabus and would therefore need attention to be paid to them in ESP course. This is not to say that other areas of grammar should be neglected-in fact, Ewer & Latorre’s work (1967: 224) showed that scientific English uses all the main structures-but rather that those items of the language which are most relevant and useful to science students should receive more attention and concentration; for instance students need to be taught early on the course how to use the passive which can be used in many situations “to give the necessary information in the best possible way; impersonally, concisely, objectively, and giving importance to the most important facts” Swales, 1971: 41) as in this sentence: The

temperature of the solution is maintained at 60 °C by a thermost. (Streven, 1973: 225); whereas an EGP syllabus would not put such emphasis on this item at, the same stage.

Likewise, in the field of vocabulary, an ESP course will have a different emphasis from an EGP course and which will reflect the scientific nature of the material that the students are dealing with. In other words, the ESP course has to put the emphasis on vocabulary of scientific concepts. For example, ESP course for students of Zoology will refer quite often to concepts of respiration, reproduction, water-relations, etc, (Ibid: 227). Apart from the common-core language, vocabulary of ESP course can be divided into two types: first, the purely specific vocabulary peculiar to each branch of science; second “sub-technical” or “semi-technical” vocabulary which is more general in distribution and useful to science students of all branches and which an EGP course could include (Bates: 1978: 92). Moreover, ESP should focus on Latin stems which are universal in science and to provide the learner with sufficient information to operate on. For instance, knowing the meaning of the stem tract would help the learner guess the meaning of extract, protract, subtract etc.

Now, we are going to point out how an ESP syllabus might differ in approach from an EGP syllabus. An ESP syllabus should, as has been stated early in this paper, have as its essential aim the fulfillment of the students’ requirements. So, due to the immediate, concrete, instrumental and practical nature of those requirements, an ESP syllabus necessarily entails a communicative approach. In support of this view, let us quote Widdowson (1979: 12):

So long as our concern is with the teaching of ‘general’ English without any immediate purpose, without knowing in any very definite way what kind of communicative requirements are to be made of it, then the need to teach language as communication is not particularly evident. Once we are confronted with the problem of teaching English for a specific purpose then we are immediately up against the problem of communication.

An EGP course, since it does not focus on specific uses in which the language will be used, will be more structurally based and more concerned with usage rather than use; whereas an ESP course, which aims to equip the student to function in specific situations, will need to focus on use; to be concerned with "the teaching of how scientists and technologists use the system of the language to communicate, and not just what linguistic elements are most commonly used" (Ibid: 12-13). As Widdowson thinks, communicative competence does not automatically follow mastery of usage and system of the language. So "rules of use have to be taught with as much care as rules of grammar" (Ibid: 13). Since a course cannot develop students' communicative competence without relating to the communicative situations the students will find themselves in, an EGP syllabus would, therefore, be of little benefit to science students in this respect.

Science students are often, called upon to fulfil functions like description, classification, giving or carrying out instructions. So, to meet this requirement of science students, an ESP syllabus has to be functional in approach. In this sense, science students can be taught grammar but not per se but as a tool with which to work; to express the notions and functions which the students perceive as relevant and useful such as identification, classification, comparison, observation and so on. (Garwaod, 1970: 246). This scientific functional approach to grammar may enhance students' motivation and interest since it shows them how they can use their knowledge of language to serve their scientific communicative needs, For instance, the conditional may be taught as the means of expressing scientific hypothesizing; e.g.

If the temperature rises more than two degrees the ice will melt.

And the simple present may be taught as the tense of scientific truth, e.g.

Water boils at 100° C; (Ibid: 248)

An ESP syllabus, which is concerned with teaching communicative uses of the language, should adopt a rather more tolerant approach to

students' mistakes than an EGP syllabus. I think it is essential for the teacher who is involved in teaching ESP to discriminate carefully between 'acceptable' mistakes; i. e. those that do not impair communication, between scientist and scientist, and those that do. In the case of the latter types of mistakes, remedial work is required (Ewer & Hughes-Davies, 1971:68).

Due to the fact that the process and procedures of science are the same in all languages, an ESP syllabus has to adopt a positive attitude towards the use of the LI and 'translation' as useful pedagogical tools. Since students in the various branches of science are already familiar with the process and procedures of their field, then the task of an ESP course is, therefore to take advantage of this knowledge found in the LI and show them how these procedures and principles of communication can be expressed through English. (Mackay & Mountford, 1978: 13). Thus, students involved in an ESP course would be 'translating' most of the time and drawing on their previous knowledge of science in the LI. An EGP course, which does not focus on such specific areas of knowledge, would not be able to draw on the LI and translation to this extent.

The learners I have in mind are a homogeneous group of post-graduate students pursuing their higher study in medicine. Those students are usually highly conscious of their needs of the uses in which, they intend to put the target language. These uses are usually associated with their major and their future professional requirements; without the knowledge of English, which is now established as the principal international language of science (Mackay & Mountford, 1978: 6), their success in their major and their development in their future profession could be restricted. Those students might also need to use English to communicate with English-speaking scientists and experts they might meet during their study or during their future profession.

In the light of above remarks made about the students concerned, one can say that they possess the two most important characteristics which characterize ESP programme and which are mentioned early in this paper:

their being adult and the auxiliary role that the English language is called upon to play as a means for furthering their specialist education. Now let us see how a syllabus catering for these needs of such student could effect teaching materials and techniques.

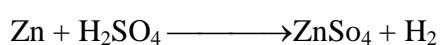
Firstly and most obviously, there is the question of what kind of coursebook to use. In the light of the above remarks, it seems clear that those students require a book which uses scientific vocabulary and which gears the grammatical components to their requirements. Since most of the EGP courses "have an overwhelmingly 'literary' content" (Ewer & Lateora: 1967, 228), then, this sort of material will be definitely deficient to meet the requirements of such students. So it seems sensible to use scientific materials as the bases for teaching vocabulary, functional grammar as well as comprehension and there is no need to overburden the students concerned with the non-relevant language of EGP texts. Thus, Niederhauser (1997: 9) remarks that "helping students to connect language learning to their personal goals is a great way for teachers to begin addressing the motivation issue in their classroom".

Another deficiency of EGP materials is that it seems to rely heavily on the simplified and abridged type of reading. So, the result of this over reliance on 'artificial' English is that when the students come across the genuine article, they find it difficult to comprehend (Ewer & Lateora 1967: 228). Therefore, materials which are intended to enhance real communicative needs of such learners should make use of reading from unmodified originals.

Though the students concerned had been exposed to English at school and at university as well, there is no guarantee, as Stevans (1973: 230) points out, that they have mastered the 'common-core' of English. Thus, it is very difficult for them to benefit from the proposed scientifically based material. What is needed is that the ESP material of those students has to be preceded by EGP material in order to provide them with the "common-core" of English. i. e the tool to work with.

The students concerned are in need of materials that prepare them to deal with the huge amount of authentic materials-spoken and written- they encounter in their scientific reading or in the sphere of their profession. Therefore, it has to involve training in comprehending spoken and written materials and in inferencing word meanings or in looking for meaning in a wider area than the sentence in order to equip them with tools and strategies to comprehend other texts rather than just the text itself. In this respect, EGB material which usually follows a structural approach is definitely inadequate since it usually suffers from absence of any technique that focuses on training the pupils in reading strategies in order to teach them to process or how to comprehend the text. In support of this view Lesard-Clouston (1997) states that language learning strategies are important for language learning because "they are tools for active, self-directed involvement, which is essential for developing communicative competence".

Apart from the differences in materials for the students concerned, techniques will differ too. Teachers involved in teaching the students concerned will adopt many effective ploys which are not accessible to the EGP teachers; they have to make use of the technique known as 'information transfer' or 'channel conversion' 'by which the learner interprets diagrams, tables etc. verbally or transfer information from verbal text to non-verbal one such as diagram, table etc. (Bates, 1978: 91). In this regard, Bruton (1961: 26) recommends "to make much more use of diagrams" and he adds that "a very great deal of exposition could be cut out by substituting clear and plentiful illustrations, which have the additional advantage of not straining the student's English." Thus, SEP teacher is to capitalize on the non-verbal material which students are familiar with from science and to use it as a basis for language work. Much language can be represented by graphs, tables, diagrams and symbols. Widdowson (1979: 33) gives an example:



This formula can be used, as Widdowson (Ibid) points out, to provide a basis for general statement of fact like:

Zinc combines with sulphuric acid to form zinc sulphate and hydrogen is given off.

When zinc combines with sulphuric acid, zinc sulphate is formed and hydrogen is given off.

So ESP teaching techniques should involve in general an exploitation of science teaching, methodology and I agree with Widdowson (Ibid: 47) when he advises the teacher of ESP to seek methodological guidance not from the linguist or the philosopher of science but from the science teacher himself.

There are other utilitarian techniques which have to be adopted in the situation concerned such as drawing on the L1 and using 'translation' as a useful pedagogical tool. Since the information that those students gain from reading English is required to be at their disposal in their L₁ and is not required to be produced or tested in English, then the assumed disadvantages of using the L1 is no longer important in the case of the students concerned (c. f, Mackay & Mountford, 1978: 12-13) .

Then in the light of the considerable differences between ESP and EGP outlined and discussed throughout this paper, one can conclude that there is acute need for a specialized coursebook whose content and techniques service the specific communicative requirements of science students and reflect their professional interests.

Before closing this section, one further point needs to be added is that such course -ESP course- should be recognized, as a complementary component of EGP and not to be treated as a substitute for it.

Section 2

So, having established the various considerations which have determined in what ways and to what extent students in the situation outlined in this paper should need an ESP Syllabus, let us turn to examine

some of the arguments that have been raised against the need for this specialized approach to language teaching.

An argument might be raised against the use of EGP in situations like the one outlined in this essay is that general courses of an "academic" nature can be used to equal effect since components such as catering for language skills -listening, speaking, reading and writing- are not peculiar to ESP syllabus and they are accessible to EGP too. It seems to me that this criticism is invalid since ESP course is concerned with these skills at the level of communication and not at a segmental (sentence) syntactic level as in the case of EGP (Falvey, 1979: 37). Apart from that, ESP course is not concerned with macro-skills as in the case of EGP but rather that with micro or sub-skills (Ibid : 39).

Among the extreme comments made against the use of ESP in the one made by Strevens (cited by Robinson, 1980: 11); he finds it is difficult to draw the line between ESP and EGP. In this aspect, Corbluth (1975: 279) also argues that the language of science is slightly deferent from the language of geography or literary criticism or forestry and that the difference is too slight to justify the design of ESP course. He maintains that "one is perfectly aware that scientific English uses the passive - so does all 'academic' English, so does poetry, so does day-to-day chat." Any way, it seems to me -that Corbluth's view is invalid because the upholders of ESP do not argue that scientific English uses a different grammar, but rather that certain grammatical features such as the passive, present simple tense etc. are of more use to the science students than others and that ESP course has to focus on these features.

Other comments made against the use of ESP and has been based on the assumption that adult students involved in ESP course have already been exposed to enough English In their English course at school to give them a practical grasp of the common-core of English. Unfortunately, this is too often not the case at all with such learners and as Strevens (1973; 230) points out that "the fact of having followed a long course in English at

school (perhaps for ten or twelve years) is no guarantee that a practical grasp of the common-core of English, has in fact been acquired." Thus, I find it difficult to see how such learners could benefit from pure ESP textbooks which are often far beyond the capabilities of such learners. So, what is needed is a good grounding in "common-core" English with scientific orientation and as Strevens (Ibid) suggests that ESP course has to be preceded by an EGP course.

Another criticism raised against the use of ESP is that "the teaching of scientific English can be a dry affair" (Hutchinson & Waters, 1982: 112, quoting Bates & Dudley Evans, 1976); confining the ESP textbooks to purely scientific material which the student already know will definitely fail to engage the learner's interests or to challenge his true abilities. In this respect, Crofts has made criticism of pure scientific coursebook Industrial English and has complained that "this is one of the standard features of ESP courses: they are so deadly serious, so earnestly work -oriented- so dull" (quoted by Robinson, 1980: 27). I think that this criticism is true of some other courses such as Herbert's The Structure of Technical English (1965). "This is not desirable, especially with students who are not very motivated" (Hutchinson & Waters, 1982: 112 quoting Bates & Dudley Evans, 1976) and it has to be remedied. It is essential to point out that remedying such situation is not a matter of mere cosmetics but it is a fundamental need since the ESP student is "motivated mainly by his interest in the content not by the forms of the language" (Hutchinson & Waters Ibid). To meet this fundamental need, ESP material should provide much more varied selection (Ibid) and avoid pure scientific topics and instead incorporating interesting and sub-technical topics such as "The Scientist and Government" and "Science and International Co-operation" in Ewer & Latorre's A Course in Basic Scientific English (1969). Another course book that can be good for this purpose is English in Medicine by Glendinning & Holmstrom (1987).

One rather more valid argument raised is that ESP cannot be said to be specific because even within the branch of English for science, we can

identify different varieties; for instance, the English of chemistry will differ from that of physics though at the same time there is a number of features common to some sciences or to all sciences. Eventually, there are certainly ragged edges around any variety of ESP (Robinson, 1980: 11). Price (1977: 27) also argues that ESP cannot be specific since however homogeneous a group of learners may appear to be on the surface, yet deeper analysis often reveals that there are great differences for instance between the bridge builder and the sewage engineer who are considered members of the same group-civil engineers. It seems to me that in Price's argument, there is implicit suggestion for one-to-one courses (see Hughes & Knight, 1977, 67-69) which are actually ruled out in the situation outlined in this paper to practical and economical reasons. A further observation made by Widdowson (1979: 52) is that there is not only one kind of scientific discourses that sciences students will be encountered with. He has outlined three kinds: 1-the discourse of science as a subject as found in text books; 2-discourse of science as a discipline, as found in research, papers or scientific periodical; 3- and a discourse of science as topic of general interest, as found in popular journalism. What follows is that science students would not require just any kind of scientific material but rather that the kind of discourse that reflects the features of their specialist subject. However, this argument does not invalidate the ESP in the situation being focused on in this paper since the students concerned require English to further their knowledge in the sphere of their profession or work and in that case they require to be exposed to the discourses of science as a subject, as a discipline, and they might be also interested in "popularized" form of scientific writing and to alleviate the dull effect of pure scientific writing as well. Any way, it is not possible to design a syllabus which suits the needs of every sub-group of students.

With regard to the exaggeration of the necessity of an ESP approach to language teaching, Mackay (1978: 23) says:

There exists the danger that because foreign language teachers make their living from teaching foreign languages, they exaggerate the importance of the need for their particular language for given groups of learners.

He maintains and comments that “this results in frustration for both the teacher and the students” (Ibid). Unfortunately, this is somehow what usually occurs in some ESP courses; some of the teachers who have long experience in teaching EGP and they are not aware of the nature of ESP task at all yet they involve themselves in such a task just to profit.

A final argument against the teaching of ESP is that the teachers engaged in ESP teaching are traditionally trained by following courses with a literary bias and they are not trained in science at all (Ewer & Latorre, 1967: 228). Therefore, they feel incompetent to teach English through concepts which they do not understand or they might approach the job without being aware of the nature of the task. Any way, this problem can be alleviated by avoiding pure technical textbooks and confining to sub-technical ones. Furthermore, such problem needs to be solved, as Ewer and Latorr (Ibid) among other writers suggest, by special training programmes for ESP teachers.

To conclude, we may say that there is no one or universal precept to approach an ESP syllabus, and that an ESP course is purposeful and is aimed at the successful achievement of the communicative needs of the science students. Each different group of learners will have their own special needs, and these needs must be analysed and evaluated before designing the syllabus. Accordingly, “any ESP course may differ from another in its selection of skills, topics, situations and also language” (Robinson, 1980: 13) One further point has to be made is that an ESP has to be a complementary part of an EGP which gives the students a sufficient grounding in ‘common-core’ of the English language which is prerequisite to any kind of language achievement. But, these structures can be introduced in a scientific context, and those structures which are most useful and relevant to science students’ requirements can be concentrated on. In support of this view, Wilkins (1977: 7) can be quoted:

The: learner does still have to master the grammatical structure. There is no way that one can 'know' a language without knowing its grammatical basis. What the new ideas amount to is that the grammatical foundation can possibly be presented in new ways which also take the communicative purposes of language into account and provide the learner much more readily with a kind of language which he can make use of in actual communication.

So, since the requirements of the students in the situation given can be fairly accurately identified, I think, a syllabus designed for such learners would definitely and considerably differ in aim, approach, and teaching material as far as content and emphasis concerned.

Conclusion

This paper has been an attempt to show how an ESP syllabus might differ in aim, emphasis and approach from an EGP syllabus and then show how such differences could affect teaching materials and techniques by reference to a specific group of learners I have in mind and whose needs, purposes for learning English have been outlined. Then an attempt has been made to look at some of the arguments raised against the use of ESP syllabus. In the meantime, we have tried to point out the validity of such arguments by reference to the specific situation given in this paper. Finally, we have concluded by acute need and a warrant for designing an ESP syllabus that reflects the communicative needs and professional interests of such learners. A suggestion has been made that such a course -an ESP course- should be preceded or accompanied by an EGP course to provide the learners with a sufficient grounding in 'common-core' of the English language which is prerequisite to any kind of language achievement. In support of this suggestion, Wilkins has been quoted.

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