

The Struggle for a Place in the Sun: Rationalizing TESP in the Twentieth Century

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1. Introduction

Lantolf and Sunderman (2001), in surveying 84 years of justification for, and defence of, foreign language study in the educational curriculum of the United States, entitled their article as 'The Struggle for a Place in the Sun: Rationalizing Foreign Language Study in the Twentieth Century'. Borrowing the title here, I will, following the same 'tradition', offer justification for as well as defence of another but relevant language- and pedagogy-related issue: the teaching of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). It is important to note at the outset that although this article focuses on ESP, the discussion certainly applies more widely and concerns Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) in general.

I begin, in the section that follows, by outlining a brief account of ESP. Attempts at justifying a situated approach (to be discussed later) to TESP then follow. This I will do by drawing on both theoretical and pedagogical considerations as observed in the literature of the general educational field (which includes foreign or second language education) in the past century. Finally, I discuss some challenges in teaching English for Specific Purposes (TESP) and suggest a number of possible solutions to these challenges.

2. Teaching English for Specific Purposes Defined

ESP may mean different things to different people. Nevertheless, leading scholars of the field such as Dudley-Evans and St John (1998), Hutchinson and Waters (1987), Robinson (1991), Strevens (1988)¹ and West (1998) have generally provided some useful defining characteristics for ESP. While agreeing in varying degrees, these scholars have either explicitly or implicitly acknowledged that any ESP courses should, at the very first place, cater to the target learners' *specific needs* (either academic or professional). They should be *content-relevant* to the learners' particular disciplines, occupations and activities (i.e. to the target

situation). Also, the *language* and *skills* should mirror authentic use by the target community (e.g. the community of doctors or of mechanical engineering students)². Ultimately, these considerations of content, language and skills are (and should be) aimed at equipping learners with the necessary knowledge to perform effectively in the target community.

It seems appropriate then to define TESP as follows:

The preparation of learners to meet their specific needs, particularly in terms of content, language and skills, for effective participation in their target community.

3. A Situated Approach to TESP: Some Justifications

We have defined TESP as the preparation of learners for effective participation in their specific target community (either academic or professional). Essentially, this entails a *situated* approach to TESP by which learners (i.e. new members or the neophytes) are being initiated into their academic or professional community. Provided below is the rationale as to why such an approach to TESP is desired.

3.1 Contextualization of language use

One belief is that there are different ‘varieties’ of the same language. Technically speaking, they are called ‘registers’. These registers, to a considerable extent, differ from one another. Thus, English for Civil Engineering is ‘different’ from English for lawyers. Indeed, research pursuing this line of inquiry in text analysis has shown that there are important grammatical differences amongst various registers. For instance, our intuition would lead us to think that the imperative as the command form of a verb is mainly used to give orders or instructions. A pioneering study examining this grammatical feature in research articles, however, reveals that writers use it also for other strategic purposes such as “engaging the reader, achieving text economy, or manifesting personal style” (Swales et al., 1998). This is but one example from a large pool of studies showing how words vary semantically and functionally in different contexts of language use (e.g. Biber et al., 1999). If we accept these text-analysis findings, adopting a situated approach to TESP seems highly plausible and logical. We expose our learners to the special lexico-grammatical nature of each register sensitive to the specific context in which they are acquiring the target language, thereby catering to their specific linguistic needs.

3.2 Relevance and learner motivation

An approach to TESP that situates the learning experience within the learner’s academic or professional community also has the face validity of addressing the learner’s immediate language learning needs. It makes the language learning experience more relevant and meaningful. In other words, because the content, language and skills are designed directly related to the particular field of the learner, learning becomes more motivating. And strength of motivation, as shown in the second language acquisition (SLA) research, serves as a powerful predictor

of second-language achievement³ (Ellis, 1994). From the perspective of motivation, placing English language learning within the context of the learner's study or work environment rather than across a variety of environment that has little relation to the learner's target community, adds an affective dimension to the educational merit of a subject-specific approach.

3.3 Situated cognitive theory of learning

Recent research in the field of general education highlights the importance of exploring situated cognition, a theory that refers to the idea that cognitive processes such as thinking and learning are situated in physical and social contexts, as a means of understanding the development of competence in domains like literacy, mathematics and science (Schunk, 2000). While research on the effectiveness of situated learning has begun only recently, initial results are promising. According to situated cognitive theory of learning, knowledge is most effectively acquired if the learning experience is situated within the actual contexts in which the knowledge occurs. As Brown et al. (1989) persuasively argue, knowledge "is not only context-sensitive, it is completely context-dependent". Since cognitive theories see linguistic knowledge as being similar to other types of knowledge and view strategies responsible for knowledge development as general in nature (Waring, 1995), the ideas voiced here further shed light on the advantage of a situated approach to TESP.

3.4 The discourse domain hypothesis

A further argument in support of a situated approach to language learning comes from an SLA perspective in the form of the Discourse Domain Hypothesis (Selinker and Douglas, 1985). The Hypothesis postulates that learners acquire a second language by first creating 'discourse domains' (or topic areas). They then use these domains to develop their second language structures. In other words, learners' interlanguage structures do not develop globally across topics but rather differentially within discourse domains. Research carried out in this area confirms the hypothesis (e.g. Woken and Swales, 1989; Whyte, 1994). From a pedagogic point of view, we should thus adopt an approach that is domain-specific. By framing the learning experience within the domain of our learners' study or work environment, we are assisting them to advance their interlanguages in the target context, enabling them to use and develop language and skills competently in situations specific to their specialism.

3.4 Different disciplinary demands

Drawing on a large body of research, Hyland (2000) convincingly argues that the writing tasks students have to tackle at the university is specific to discipline and educational level. Citing Bridgeman and Carlson (1984), for example, he shows that academic practices differ enormously across disciplines. It was found that engineering faculty gave priority in postgraduate programmes to describing charts while business studies teachers wanted students to practise compare-contrast and take a position. Hyland and Hamp-Lyons (2002) also point out that, from a large

pool of survey research, there is now clear evidence that there are not only considerable variation of discourses across curriculum but also differences in the structure of common genres across disciplines. Teaching ESP therefore entails taking into consideration the wider sociocultural issues and distinct disciplinary practices that strongly influence both the construction and interpretation of students' work. This view further emphasizes the importance of adopting a target community approach to TESP in addressing students' urgent needs to perform effectively in specific disciplines (Johns, 1988; see also Candlin and Hyland, 1999).

Based on the review of research thus far, one can see that there is, indeed, a need for a situated approach to teaching English in specific contexts. Having some understanding of why such an approach is much sought after, some challenges we face in adopting a subject-specific approach will be addressed.

4. A Situated Approach to TESP: Some Challenges

This article has been confined to discuss two issues related to the challenges the language teacher has to face in the ESP classroom. A number of possible solutions to these challenges in academic contexts will be presented although it is relevant more widely.

One of the major challenges for language teachers in the ESP classroom is obviously that we lack the expertise and knowledge to teach in the learner's chosen discipline. If we are to teach, for instance, a group of electronic engineering students, we will most likely face the awkward situation of not being able to answer the students' content-related questions. For those who highly regard themselves as members of a knowledgeable professional community, such a situation is often deemed face threatening and hence their preference for general English teaching, focussing on common topics of social sciences.

Another challenge we have to face is concerning the idea that ESP is too difficult for students at lower levels of English proficiency and that they need to acquire a 'common core' of language forms or features before they can pursue ESP. This view is based on what Bloor and Bloor (1986) call the Common Core Hypothesis. The hypothesis conjectures that there are common features of English which can be found across a wide range of varieties. Thus, English for lawyers, for example, is said to share nearly all the linguistic features with English for civil engineers. In this view, adopting broad-based English teaching that covers topics of general interest appears, again, to be a better alternative in catering for these lower proficiency students.

From these two viewpoints, it seems that our call for a situated approach to TESP is being adversely challenged, despite our earlier sound justifications for such an approach. Given the lack of a *specific* purpose, however, adopting a broad-based approach may lead us into the occasional blind alley along our professional journey. That is, as members of a learned, *professional* community by which we

take pride to be acknowledged, we should not lose sight of our ultimate goal in the ESP classroom: to prepare our learners to meet their *specific needs* for effective participation in their target community. The challenges discussed earlier should not, therefore, be viewed as problems but should instead prompt us to see what solutions there may be to hand.

Since one of the strongest claims made for ESP courses is that they meet the specific communicative needs of the intended learners, insiders' information is thus deemed essential and will mark the first move towards exploring the challenges we face. By 'insiders', we mean the specialist informants which consist of the subject specialists and the students of a particular field. We need these insiders' information to form the basis of much ESP materials and pedagogy; in other words, we need the information in order to make inroads into the learner world so that we can draw invaluable insights from their academic or professional life to make informed decisions on our pedagogy (Bhatia, 1994).

One way by which we can materialize the idea of 'making inroads' is to involve close collaboration between language and subject specialists, especially in the learner's academic context. An excellent example is the UTM (Universiti Teknologi Malaysia) English for Civil Engineering programme, a joined collaborative effort between the Department of Modern Languages and the Faculty of Civil Engineering. In the collaboration, the language instructors and content lecturers have several meetings preceding each semester, during which the content lecturers provide information on the overall goals of the particular semester, the nature of the subjects, the course outline, key textbooks, important topics to be covered and tutorial questions. Based on the information given as well as having examined samples of previous student-assignments, reports and field-work entries, the language instructors then decide on the technical content through which language learning is to take place (see Khairi, 1998 for further discussion).

Such collaborative work benefits all parties. Perhaps most importantly, learners' acquisition of the target language in their own discipline can be facilitated and our professional obligations at meeting the ESP learners' specific needs can be fulfilled. It should be noted that it is always helpful for language instructors to highlight in advance their lack of expertise in the content subject and that it is not their intention to teach its content, both in this kind of collaborative work and in the ESP classroom (Khairi, 1998). Not only will this help to establish the respective roles of the language instructor and the subject specialist in their collaborative effort, that language instructors are to be consulted only on the target language can be made explicit as well in the classroom context. The issue of ESP practitioners encountering the potentially face threatening situation of being non-experts in the learner's content area can thus be approached with more ease.

Accordingly, we should reconsider our role in the ESP classroom. As Dlasca (1999, p. 407) rightly points out:

since language teachers are not usually experts in the subject matter ... LSP [Language for Specific Purposes]-teaching must be learner centred. As Buhlmann and Fearn's emphasise, "teachers in LSP organise the learning process, they enable students rather than instruct them" (Buhlmann and Fearn's, 1991, p. 117). The difficulties teachers and learners face in an LSP-context are at opposing ends of a scale,[sic] Steinmetz observes: "if learners struggle with language, teachers may not comprehend content" (Steinmetz, 1993, p. 232). The resulting information gap can lead to genuine communications between specialists from different fields; the target language becomes a tool in the specialist context rather than an obstacle to expert communication.

Before proceeding to the conclusion section, let us turn to the issue and belief that weak students need to have control over a common core before they can move on to acquiring specific, and presumably more difficult, features of language. The argument is, to a large extent, more intuitive than scientific for research findings in SLA do not support such a view. As Nunan (1999) points out, the process of second language acquisition is more like growing a garden than building a wall. Learners do not learn one thing perfectly one at a time but learn numerous things simultaneously (and imperfectly). Further, if the Common Core Hypothesis is correct, "then students can learn this core at the same time as the specific variety rather than the other way round, a more cost-effective approach to learning" (Hyland, 2000, p. 5).

5. Conclusion

As we enter the new century, it is unfortunately still difficult to predict, like Lantolf and Sunderman's (2001) observation on foreign language study, whether a situated approach to TESP will eventually find an uncontested place in the sun. As Hyland (2000) observes, there is an increasing trend away from this instructional approach towards a broader activity that is closer to general language teaching. This trend, however, should not encourage us to opt for soft-option, general English courses for ESP learners. As this article has attempted to show and as the research findings and scholarly discussion of the past century demonstrate⁴, there are numerous advantages constituting a clear rationale in support of the value of a domain-specific approach, ranging from the linguistic, affective, cognitive to the sociocultural perspectives of language use and development.

By way of conclusion, it may be useful here to consider an elegant remark recently made by a scholar of the field at an international LSP seminar. The scholar contends that there are two 'evils' in the teaching profession: the first is 'teaching without joy' and the other 'learning without hope'. While I am unsure if TESP offers much joy to the language teacher, adopting a situated approach to TESP, I believe, can assist us to make informed decisions at raising hopes for our learners. I hope that by reassessing our practices as ESP teachers whose ultimate goal is to facilitate learners' effective participation in their target community, we will be more ready to consider the proposed approach as a principled means of guiding our

learners along their language learning journey in specific contexts, arguably more confidently on the bright high road away from the blind alley.

Notes

Stevens (1988), a frequently cited article, offers very useful defining characteristics of ESP, or what he calls 'the four absolute and two variable characteristics of ESP'.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987), however, express the view that ESP should be concerned only with a set of universal skills or language features.

Ellis (1994) also points out that strength of motivation may itself be the result of previous learning experiences.

For convenience, the phrase 'past century' is used here. If we agree with Swales (1985), ESP is about 40 years old.

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ABSTRACT

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Borrowing the title from Lantolf and Sunderman's (2001) 'The Struggle for a Place in the Sun: Rationalizing Foreign Language Study in the Twentieth Century', this article attempts to offer justification for as well as defence of a situated approach to teaching English for specific purposes (TESP). Five arguments are put forward to justify the position adopted, drawing on the linguistic, affective, cognitive and sociocultural perspectives of language use and development. The article also discusses some challenges in TESP and suggests a number of possible solutions to these challenges. It concludes by arguing that in its struggle for an uncontested place in the sun, a domain specific approach to TESP requires the ESP practitioner's commitment to make principled decisions in the light of the clear advantages of such an approach, as this article has attempted to show and as the research findings and scholarly discussion of the past century demonstrate.
