REVIEW ARTICLE: ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES

Those LSP practitioners whose appetite for theoretical models has become jaded by the plethora of these in the last decade will welcome the refreshingly practical approach of this timely addition to the authoritative Longman series: Applied Linguistics and Language Study. The book is sub-titled: A Case Study Approach. Indeed, such overall statements and perspectives as are put forward here seem very much to be the result of the practical experience (often approaching the anecdotal) of course designers and writers in England and overseas rather than the expression of the type of deductive approach which ignores the learner's academic needs, motivation, institutional and local conditions.

It is no criticism of this anthology that it concentrates on that branch of English for Special Purposes which has come to be known as English for Academic Purposes (EAP), namely English studied within the context of formal educational systems rather than for directly occupational use (EOP = English for Occupational Purposes). Discussion is further limited largely to the teaching of science and technology at the tertiary and post-graduate levels.

This only argues for a sequel to this book which would deal fully with other major subject divisions falling outside science and technology; here, different ESP problems may require different solutions. Law is clearly such a case since it lacks the common (cross-cultural) conceptual sub-structure that characterizes science. Likewise, other factors enter when we are concerned with an occupational as opposed to an academic domain to determine the shape of the LSP course. Academic survival may provide a type of motivation distinct from that required for professional survival. In-service training and other manipulations of the teaching/learning setting also give a different character to EOP. Finally, not the least of the problems facing the EOP designer is the greater degree of specificity of needs which is often found in the occupational sphere, that is, when one moves outside the ready-made taxonomy of academic disciplines and institutional structures. We should, therefore, guard against the assumption that solutions transfer easily from one end to the other of the complete LSP spectrum.

This said, 'English for Specific Purposes' takes the honest line that the special purpose course must be organized within a needs/ends framework. This is axiomatic where LSP as opposed to global all-purpose courses is concerned. Chapter 2 deals with the means of identifying these needs, i.e. questionnaires. Again, the distinction is clearly drawn between those courses where English is the medium of instruction, e.g. for foreign learners at British universities (see case studies in section 3) and those courses where English is supportive to a subject course, as with science and technology at the universities of Tabriz and Libya (chapters 3 and 5).

As to means, all contributors have been keenly aware of the problems relating to presentation and practice. A pedagogic assessment of the means apt for a maximally authentic and effective practice of those skills isolated by a needs assessment is inseparably connected with decisions at the linguistic and psychological levels. To what extent should the LSP designer wait upon advances in linguistic science to provide him with an adequate description of those areas of language which fall within the purview of the learner's needs? The solution preferred in this book seems to be that the designer should not wait for Godot but instead adopt an eclectic and pragmatic attitude, picking and choosing from different linguistic treatments/models, and compensating by his own analyses for those gaps where no treatments are available. The point is well taken for linguistic descriptions tend to be partial in their preoccupations, are not exhaustive even within their chosen limits, are liable to constant revision on excessively subtle points and do not always provide explanations which are pedagogically adaptable.

It is also only in the last decade that linguists have turned their attention from an immanent linguistics to the functioning of the formal system in the social context, as also from sentence grammars to text grammars. It has become an urgent problem in the
psychology of language, therefore, to find a learning theory which will account for the
fact of communicative rather than simply linguistic competence. In the present state
of this art, the practical classroom teacher's guesses are probably as good as anyone's.
At any rate the contributors in this selection appear particularly sensitive to the
demand for flexibility in adapting the means experimented with in the face of negative
feedback, which amounts to the evolution and application of a theory of communicative
learning, however impressionistic or ad hoc. All this speaks much for the practical bias
of this book.

Existing pedagogic sources should not be ignored when designing up-to-date LSP materials
since many well-tried means are still relevant despite changes in pedagogic fashion.
Allen and Widdowson show clearly the virtue of evaluating such materials as a preliminary
to course production (see chapter 4).

The second section is devoted to the writing of published courses (largely) for tertiary
level consumption, while section 3 deals mainly with courses at the tailor-made end of
the specificity scale. The editors' survey in section 1 clarifies some of the terms
of the trade, outlines the crucial factors in ESP materials design, and discusses the evol-
ution in thinking on LSP models.

In their introduction the editors rightly underline the distinction between a special
language and a specialized aim. The 'special' in the term 'English for Special Purposes'
refers to the latter, and thus the emphasis falls on 'the purpose of the learner for
learning the language, not on the language he is learning' (which is presumably the
rationale for the coinage found in the title: English for Specific Purposes).

On a more controversial note, the editors believe that 'special languages' are something
of a misnomer, or even a myth. Restricted repertoires, like 'the language of international
air traffic control', are 'special' by virtue of their high situational predictability,
but not 'language' since they consist simply of an inventory of words and phrases; on the
other hand, 'the language of banking' is 'language', but not 'special', i.e. it is not
a language, or variety, distinguishable either from other 'languages', like 'the language
of naval architecture', or from General English, apart from a distinctive terminology.

These are fighting words to the text analyst with a computational turn of mind. If M and
M are right, how did we come to believe the myth of 'special languages'? There may be
a tendency among LSP people to posit (a priori) that for every isolable domain outside
language there must necessarily exist a matching variety distinct from other varieties.
This must, of course, be demonstrated not assumed. The whole question, however, hinges
on one's definition of 'distinctiveness'. Is this supposed to be absolute or rather a
matter of weighting? It may well be, as M and M imply, that we have crossed a rather
rickety logical bridge - that which (in the formulas of the trade) leads from, for in-
stance, English for Bankers (i.e. learner needs) on to English for Banking (i.e. domain)
to arrive at Banking English/The Language of Banking (i.e. 'special language').

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NOTICES

In Publication no 4 of the CEBAL (Copenhagen School of Economics and Business Adminis-
tration Language Department), Max Gorosch has published an article: Modern Language
Teaching to Adults for Professional Use, first written as a commissioned study for the
Unesco ALSED Programme, September 1975.