REVIEW ARTICLE: PAULINE ROBINSON: ESP (ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES):
THE PRESENT POSITION


Many of the important and exciting developments in ESP (English for Specific Purposes) have never appeared in book form, but are presented and described in the more inaccessible and ephemeral types of publication, such as, conference reports, occasional papers, local journals, unpublished mimeographs. The shadowy existence of this wealth of information has now been illuminated by Pauline Robinson of the Centre for Applied Language Studies of the University of Reading, in her concise (121-page) and useful book on ESP. As the author says in her introduction, this is the quintessential ESP: 'materials produced for use once only by one group of students in one place at one time'. Though hardly viable in commercial publishing terms, where marketing potential is the decisive factor, such materials and reports on the experience derived from their use provide course designers and teachers with new sources of inspiration, and suggest techniques of exploitation and forms of presentation adaptable to the needs of other specific learner groups or rather could do so if they knew what was available or had the time to ferret it out. Hence the rationale for a book of this type.

Such a service has been provided, and still is, by the British Council's English Teaching Information Centre (ETIC) Information Guide on ESP, but Robinson's book attempts to supplement the Guide, to update it by restricting reference largely to works published in the last decade, as also to expand some of the areas. The 504-item bibliography covering not only ephemera of the above type but also published books and articles on the theory and practice of ESP has the advantage over those of the annotated type in that discussion of (selected) individual items is reserved for treatment in separate chapters: 1. Definitions of ESP; 2. Survey of theoretical positions; 3. Analysis of current publications, a more economical and less confusing procedure, i.e. one that can more easily separate the wheat from the chaff to present the broader outlines. It is organized under the following heads:

A. Journals
B. Project and conference reports
C. Collections of papers and articles
D. Articles relating to definitions of ESP
E. Articles relating to a historical study of ESP
F. Books and articles on register analysis
G. Books and articles on discourse analysis and the communicative approach
H. Books and articles on student motivation and the analysis of needs
I. Articles and papers on syllabus design
J. Articles and papers on materials production
K. Articles and papers on methodology
L. Articles on teacher training
M. Articles on testing and evaluation
N. Articles and papers on self-directed learning
O. Series of textbooks
P. Articles and textbooks by subject matter
   P/1 Social Sciences
   P/2 Physical Sciences
   P/3 Technology
   P/4 Medicine
   P/5 Commerce
   P/6 Study skills
   P/7 Other
The criterion for selection under O and P is that the given work was described as an ESP book by the publisher, which raises the question whether publishers have always acted in good faith. As the author says, English language teaching is notoriously subject to fashion, of which its most prestigious fashion of recent years is ESP. More frequently at the beginning of the last decade than currently some commercial publishers paid lip-service to ESP by simply tricking out all-purpose courses with 'special texts', no real attempt being made to enhance functional awareness or effective use by the learner of the rhetoric of a given specialism. ESP consumers, both learners and teachers, have come to expect a far greater sophistication in ready-made materials than hitherto, which may partly be accounted for by competition from the tailor-made end of the spectrum. Those teacher readers not normally called on to design courses themselves will find the comparative evaluation of current publications - series like 'English in Focus' and 'Nucleus', as well as individual textbooks - extremely useful when considering what coursebooks to use for an ESP group (especially if it falls within the Science and Technology bracket, where the range of alternatives is by far the greatest).

Perhaps the tailor-made v. published distinction suggests too much of an either/or: most users of commercial ESP courses will supplement them with materials of their own; again, by virtue of the fact that specificity in ESP terms implies complexity, the significant factor may well be one of level - the tailor-made course providing the icing on the cake once the (basic) broad band ESP course has been gone through. Chapter 2 is too brief in itself to be of much use for those embarking on materials production; in any case, it is presumably intended rather to direct the reader's attention to the salient theoretical points to be found in the articles of section F - J in the bibliography.

'ESP: The Present Position' achieves its object very well; that is, it does provide a short and clear 'state of the art' analysis/survey of ESP (see D.A. Wilkins' introduction). Only of trivial terminological interest, therefore, is the seeming mismatch in aim of this book and the series as a whole, whose sub-title is 'Position Papers'. For 'Position Papers' read 'Present Position Papers' (i.e. 'State of the Art Papers')? In 'English for Academic Study' (ETIC, 1975, Preface) (item 44 in the bibliography), we find 'Position Papers' having the quite opposite meaning of '(potentially) controversial' (cf. 'consensus' or 'state of the art') - the present book is far from this.

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