R. K. Singh: THE NEEDS/ENDS FRAMEWORK OF ESP IN INDIA

The passage from 'special' to 'specific' in ESP marks a theoretical and pedagogic advancement in that it is indicative of the LSP (Language for Special Purposes) researchers' concern for defining their activities in terms of goals which, in turn, takes into account certain basic questions like: who the learners are, what their linguistic background or level of competence is, what their view to language learning is, what their purpose and expectations are, what particular skills they will be needing in their actual, on-the-job situation etc. The focus is on 'specific' needs rather than 'specific' languages with the objective of solving the learners' specific linguistic difficulties. In other words, the 'special/specific' in ESP refers to "specialised aim" (as distinct from a special language) with emphasis on "the purpose of the learner for learning the language, not on the language he is learning", to quote Ronald Mackay and Alan Mountford. 'Purposes' in ESP suggests a conscious aim on the part of the learner as well as the teacher. As Robin Turner explains: 'S' leans towards 'P', since 'specific language' can hardly mean any language variety.

Though ESP is linguistics' immense contribution to language teaching in that the approach is delimited to the needs and demands of learners' occupational or professional communication, and though there is so much development in its method and material vis-a-vis the learners' requirements (in the Western countries and America), there are several stumbling blocks both for teachers and course designers in the situation of a country like India, that call for careful attention.

A realistic appraisal of the situation will not be possible unless the gap between the language needs, language demands and language supply is bridged and these are properly identified and assessed within the socio-economic constraints and the national language policy. There will also be a need for wide ranging discussion of academic questions like, (I) is it really true that students face difficulties in following their technical/scientific texts and lectures? (II) is it true that students cannot communicate even if they have the mastery of the technical subject because they have no command - written or oral - over the language? (III) is the English teacher in a technical institution expected to teach the 'specialised text' or the non-specialised language? (IV) should he be a content specialist as well as a language adviser? (V) can the English teacher legitimately teach language without any subject knowledge of the area of 'specialism'? and should ESP be taught by language specialists or by subject specialists? (VI) is it the English teaching of Science/Technology or English for Science/Technology? (VII) is the knowledge and teaching of terminology of technical/scientific text necessary in the Indian context? (VIII) is there any need of specialised teacher-training to manage ESP? etc.

Though the English courses currently offered at ISMx) have little relation between the learners' needs, aims and objectives, choice of text-materials, linguistic content or the types of exercise etc. and though there has been no systematic study of their specific needs and various psychological and linguistic factors to create interest in English lessons (even if it carries equal weightage), I have never heard or noticed students complaining that they face difficulty in following their subject texts or even in using the artificial devices of science language such

x) Indian School of Mines
as symbols, formulae, graphs etc. It is actually the manipulation of the natural language in communicating ideas and thoughts they face difficulties in, that is, writing in what we call scientific style as expressed by objectivity, precision, passive construction, factual expression, absence of expressiveness and emotions, predominance of certain forms and structures, and of course, at a higher level, use of illustrations, diagrams, tables, figures and other non-linguistic means of expression.

During the last seven years, ISM has followed and abandoned the following textbooks in the first two years (and later, first three semesters) of the five-year (ten-semester) B. Tech course:

(I) A. J. Herbert: The Structure of Technical English (ELBS)

(II) T T I CALCUTTA: English for Technical Students (Orient-Longman)

(III) L. Brander (ed): Portrait of the Present (Oxford)


(V) H. Dowe (ed) : Science Speaks (Oxford)

(VI) W. Eastwood (ed) : Science and Literature (Macmillan) Second Series

(VII) Graham Graves: Foundation: English for Science Students (Oxford)

F. T. Wood's A Remedial English Grammar for Foreign Students (Macmillan) has also been in use as a reference book. Of all the textbooks named above, the first and the last could help teach certain linguistic elements and patterns - related or unrelated to students' needs - though, I am afraid, appropriate text material and audio-visual aids have never been used, which is possibly an important reason for students not changing their attitude: they have never taken English class seriously and have never been motivated to study the so-called Technical English. However, year after year, in course of informal discussions with them I have learnt that they have no difficulty in coping with their science/engineering/technical textbooks or lectures. But they have often complained that the English class gives them too little experience or skill-competence to enable them to use the language in their own field of specialisation. They may, though, be able to 'manage' communication of their technical knowledge, but it is not satisfactory or effective because, for example, they make errors of all sorts. My feedback testifies to their expressed need for the systematic development of competence both in written and oral relaying of communication. In the context of a technical university, the ESP teacher, therefore, is first expected to help them learn to write for a variety of people and purposes and then, take remedial measures to improve their oral communication. Mere grammatical correction might not be sufficient: he has to develop communicative fluency of his students, which also appears to be their valid expectation. Besides, since more and more specific language requirements have been created by our society, the ESPist teacher's task basically consists in analysing and specifying the needs of his students which, in turn, will determine what should be taught and how to teach it.
But any fruitful measure towards the specification of students' needs can begin with Error Analysis (EA) which will help
(I) to establish the areas of grammatical, lexical and cohesive errors,
(II) to explain the causes of these errors, and
(III) suggest ways and means of improving the situation.

It will also help establish a close connection between ESP and EA in various situations such as answering examination questions, writing of Project Reports, academic papers or delivering seminar talks etc.

The teaching/learning strategy is determined by communicative needs of different groups and proficiencies of different degrees (to meet special professional demands of technical students) with aims and objectives in the main. It seems to me that an effective ESP in the Indian context may aim at preparing students to independently read, understand and reproduce in their own language the materials of science/technology; to understand/write academic or professional articles and participate in discussions; to enable them to consult reference materials; to express their own ideas concerning personal affairs, socio-political, cultural, and of course, scientific/technical activities etc.

A better way to identify and define the objective of teaching English in a technical university appears to be a personal interview or feedback from students who have already passed out and are settled in their respective professions. It may truly reveal
(I) the relevance of English language teaching (for whatever purposes)
(II) the skills required to be developed (reading, writing, speaking, etc.) and
(III) the nature of the text material vis-a-vis the actual occupational demands.

If English is taught keeping in view its professional use, then each profession's specific requirement - how and in what circumstances English is used in that profession and the students' needs at the stage when English is taught - is to be analysed. If it is for an on-the-job use, the teacher needs to understand not only the degree of speciality/complexity of the language used but also the type of communicative skills to be developed. At the same time, the teacher has to maintain the students' general linguistic competence and abilities. They have to be linguistically prepared not only for specialist-to-specialist in intra/inter-disciplinary communication but also for specialist-to-layman communication.

In other words, language planning and teaching need to exploit the communicative resource of each individual which consists of his ability to communicate effectively in different contexts as also for a satisfactory inter-disciplinary, social and cross-cultural encounter and mutual communication with proper linguistic etiquette.

As to the ESP material management at I S M, there has hardly been any exploitation of books of other subjects, journals and other audio-visual aids available in the institution, most probably due to confusion whether it is English teaching of engineering/technology or English teaching for engineering/technology. The former is the language students will require to cope with, the latter is the language students will need to know in order to cope with. For want of clear understanding as
to the role of English teaching, it seems the course/curriculum planners (non-English discipline) at ISM could not identify needs or specify goals, though they had been fascinated by EST/ESP.

The problem has also upset the classroom-role of English teachers in that those unfamiliar with the nuances of language teaching (but positioned at the helm of affairs) think that he should also teach the specialised language, including the vocabulary, of science and technology. There is no denying the fact that scientific/engineering texts have their own syntactic and stylistic peculiarities distinguished from the manners and means of general, non-specialised language, which is generally well understood, as the students have been studying it before taking admission in a technical institution. At the tertiary level, it is agreeable, they have largely to be able to understand and interpret specialised texts. But what is not realised here is the need to know the particular area of their weakness, which it appears to me, is the difficulty in factual, written communication. In a scientific/technical English class, therefore, the students have to be trained in objective ways of thinking and looking at things, which again requires training in factual, impersonal, unambiguous, and at the same time, economical writing. They have to be taught, for example, how to organise statement, explanation, argument, deduction, comparison or refutation in their verbal composition. It would be, of course, helpful if the English teacher has a knowledge and understanding of the various forms of the usage of scientific language. If he is also concerned with the building of linguistic concepts of engineering/technology, then the technical vocabulary rather than the content of the technical subject will have to be integrated with the learning of language. He may have to familiarise himself with the technical terminology and its stylistic and syntactic characteristics.

However, my feeling is that the concept of a technical/scientific term is generally clear in the mind of students who most often come to technical institutions after success in an all-India competition, which is in English medium. (The case of polytechnic and such other institutions is different). Thus, they have not to be taught technical terms by the English teacher, for it can be best taught by the technical subject teacher. Indeed, an English teacher with the knowledge of scientific/technical vocabulary/subject matter is in an advantageous position. All that he may, then, need to acquire is the competence and adaptability - to meet with the practical demands of teaching-learning situation.

But in actual practice the language teacher is traditionally drawn from the ranks of the humanities graduates and has no science/technology background. Invariably his secondary level science knowledge is either in regional language medium or forgotten long before he becomes an English teacher. There are very few of such non-subject-specialist language teachers who can survive the 'strains' of ESP teaching. Very often, he fails to deliver the goods because, for example, he does not know the meanings of most of the technical terms and as such the meaning of the sentence in which the terms occur remain vague in his mind and vaguely can he transmit any conceptual structure. For his lack of knowledge of the specialist subject field, he cannot create or innovate, even if he has a linguistics background, unless of course he has some specific training in ESP and he is apt in his judgment of students' linguistic and psychological constitutives.
Therefore, it appears imperative that instead of 'jargonising' English teaching mechanism to establish power and influence or to discriminate against non-experts, the ESPists (or even the teachers of English language in technical institutions) need to devote themselves to the problems of teaching of clear, simple English for the purposes of effective communication. They need also to work for the simplification of the so-called language of experts, evincing a greater sensitivity to the socio-linguistic problems of students.

The conditions in India are different from those in America or western countries, and decisions made on the basis of their experiences will have little applicability here. Under the circumstances, unless the western ESP is adapted to the academic and future professional language needs of Indian students of science and engineering, and unless the function of English language teaching in our country is realistically re-defined, teaching of English will continue to degenerate into the mess it is already in.

The adoption or execution of any teaching/learning method or curriculum has to go hand in hand with education reforms, ESP teaching methodology as also the syllabus planning has to take into account the complex of the medium of instruction in primary/secondary education in various states and the position of English at the national level. Other local factors like the government's language policy, the present educational system, the socio-economic condition and the literacy level of the people, the pre-professional background and the future role of the students have also to be considered for any positive result.

Unfortunately, there is no correlation or continuity in the whole process of English teaching method and material from primary to higher secondary to colleges and universities. There is a sort of haphazardness in the whole system which may render it difficult to remedy the communicative deficiencies at a later level with limited resources, time and personnel. Therefore, it seems generally difficult to have a fair assessment of what the students already know, what is understandable to them without much labour, and what and how new things are to be imparted, unless there is an inbuilt provision for a regular ongoing study of these issues within the ESP programme, structured within the needs/ends framework.

REFERENCES:


