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A Case of an Extra-Sensitive Perception of ESP

Fadhil H.A.Y. Mansor

School of Language Studies and Linguistics
Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
fahdil@pkrisc.cc.ukm.my

Abstract

Given the choice, many English language practitioners would rather not have anything to do with ESP. One of the oft-quoted reasons for this from instructors is that ESP can only be taught by those knowledgeable in the subject matter. Another reason relates to the question of methodology, whereby instructors, in trying to appear knowledgeable, often find themselves inadequate even in the role of pseudo-subject experts. As for course developers, selecting textbooks that are suitable for both homogeneous and heterogeneous classes can be almost impossible.

Does teaching ESP require knowledgeable in the subject matter? Is ESP not a language affair beneath the guises it assumes? Because however alien its content may be, that content is still embedded in English, and there is virtually nothing of it that cannot be unearthed with some help from a technical dictionary and a good grasp of English.

Deficiency in the content area is only part of the cause of instructors' anxiety. The question of how to conduct an ESP class is another cause. In this regard, many teachers tend to make the mistake of trying to be experts in both the language and subject areas at the expense of their credibility.

The VG2223 (English For Applied Sciences II) course, offered to engineering and applied sciences students at the National University of Malaysia, offers a way out of this quandary.

Introduction

The problem with ESP for many is that, unlike English for General Purposes (EGP), it is perceived as being hybridised in the sense that it is as much a language as it is a subject-matter affair. Because of this, it does not enjoy the same ready reception as EGP. Given the choice, many instructors would rather have nothing to do with it, some even declining outright if given ESP classes to teach. This fear of ESP is attested by Early who describes an ESP teacher as 'a language instructor, quite frequently of an inexperienced kind, who is called upon to carry out a delicate and highly specialised task' and who 'will be accountable for his results to the specialist teacher who enjoys the status he does not enjoy' (1981: 2).

Is ESP really that specialised that only those knowledgeable in the subject matter can teach it? I personally feel that despite all the guises it may assume, ESP is still a language affair. Because however alien its content may be, it is still embedded in English, and there is virtually nothing of it that cannot be unearthed with some help from a technical dictionary and a good grasp of English.

Being deficient in the content area is only part of the cause of many instructors' anxiety. Equally, if not more, perturbing is the question of how to conduct an ESP class. In this regard, many teachers tend to make the mistake of trying to be experts in both the language and subject areas. Having been 'thrown' into the realm of ESP, they feel compelled to assume the role of a specialist teacher for fear of appearing less authoritative to the students. While it is commendable if they could also impart subject knowledge to the students besides language, the fact of the matter is that it is not their job. Attempting this only predisposes them to ridicule and loss of credibility, as some instructors have found out, simply because however much they know of the subject matter, it is just not enough.

The above are some of the issues I will discuss in this article, which is primarily to justify the syllabus design of "VG2223: English For Sciences II", an ESP course that I helped to develop and currently teach at the Department of English Proficiency in the Faculty of Language Studies at the National University of Malaysia.

In espousing the methodology used in this course, I make the following claims:

learners of language, or any subject for that matter, have their own personal agenda or syllabus which assumes more relevance for them than the syllabus prescribed by the course designer

proficiency is more quickly attained if language is used as a tool for the acquisition of information rather than learned as a subject

learners' affective factors such as motivation, interests and personality become ever more important as students progress to higher levels of learning

at the risk of sounding maverick, I believe needs analysis has only cursory usefulness in the design of ESP courses especially for classes with heterogeneous student make-up

I would like to begin by first highlighting the main features of this course.

Feature 1 No Textbook

Given the learner-centred approach to be adopted, and more importantly, the heterogeneous make-up of the class, no particular textbook is prescribed for the students. Instead, they are required to select and bring learning materials from their own discipline to class. The suitability and relevance of the materials, however, must be checked, and as all the materials will essentially be for content references, the teacher might need to consult subject specialists.

Feature 2 No Teaching, Only Facilitating

Students do projects throughout the course, thus teaching does not come into the picture. If at all teaching is necessary, this will be on how to carry out project work - research methodology, critical thinking, report writing, oral presentation techniques - at the beginning of the course. The instructor plays the role of a facilitator, i.e. to help students proceed with their projects.

Feature 3 Negotiated Learning

Students are at all times in negotiation with the facilitator as to what they want to learn, with whom they want to learn and how they want to learn. Thus, students decide the own topics for the projects and work with their own selection of group members, and their classes take on a less structured appearance. Peer conferencing and consultations between students and facilitator are the mainstay of the lessons.

Rationale for Feature 1

A perennial problem plaguing ESP courses relates to the selection of textbooks for no single ESP textbook covers all the language aspects of a certain field (Gulyamova, 2000). Besides, the prescribed textbook is, very often, either too general or too specific in content. In either case, the instructor finds himself in a dilemma because he has to define the balance between what is general and what is specific in the input he gives. If it is too general, he will feel redundant as an ESP teacher. If it is too specific, his students might think that he is trying to be a subject-specialist, and so evaluate him in that light. Any deficiencies that he might show in terms of subject matter will have an eroding effect on his credibility. His discretion is made even more difficult by the heterogeneity of his class make-up, often comprising students from several different and diverse disciplines.

Personally, I feel the notion of a prescribed textbook incongruous within an ESP setting. It seems to be in collision with the fundamental idea of uniqueness of learning needs as advocated by ESP experts such as Munby (1978). His formulation of the Communicative Needs Processor (CNP) model was precisely for the purpose of identifying, isolating and accommodating students' peculiarities in language learning. Prescribing a particular textbook carries with it the implication that students have been accurately streamed - normally according to proficiency level and area of interest - and this I believe can never happen. Even if it could, there are other parameters such as motivation, learning style, learning preferences and learning environment that form part of the CNP needs profile but are conveniently overlooked in streaming.

There is another setback to prescribing textbooks for ESP classes. No doubt, they have always been an integral part of a syllabus, and that they have served many teachers well, providing them with the pivot onto which their lessons hinge. Similarly, students have found textbooks indispensable as a compendium of sort, whereby knowledge is organised in the most systematic and comprehensive way. In fact, according to O'Neill (1990), textbooks enables students to review and prepare their lessons, and are efficient in terms of time and money. What is disturbing, however, is that by anchoring their teaching and learning to the textbook, both the teacher and the

students are, in effect, moulding their objectives after those of the author. Littlejohn and Windeatt (1989) and Allwright (1990) even go as far as saying that textbooks and materials have hidden agendas and do control learning and teaching. In my department, I have come across courses where the objectives have been transplanted in toto from the textbook it prescribes. This may be well and good if the objectives of the book and those of the students coincide. But what if they do not? How specific would the purpose for learning English be then?

Instead of prescribed textbooks, reference materials (be they books, journals, lecture notes and so on) should be advocated for ESP. However, their selection should be determined by the students themselves, and not the instructor. The advantages of this are obvious, namely, it will help:

circumvent the question of relevancy

motivate students as they will feel more in control of their own reading

widen students' reading range

encourage students to be selective and critical in their reading

instil in the students a sense of purpose in their reading

prepare students for research-based work later on

However, the choice of references needs to be approved by the instructor before they could be used by the students.

Rationale for Feature 2

With little specialist knowledge to expound and no textbook to lean on, there is nothing much an instructor can do in terms of teaching. Therefore, he has to assume an alternative role in class, and one that readily fits in with his new situation is that of a facilitator.

But it is not so much for this reason that facilitating is advocated. There is a need in the first place to get away from input-oriented teaching and move into process-plus-output-oriented facilitating at tertiary level of language learning. The rationale is two-pronged. First, students who enter university, on the average, already have had thirteen years of formal learning of English, certainly a formidable period of time and possibly a formidable amount of input as well judging from the KBSR[1]and KBSM[2] syllabuses. Secondly, what many students lack is not the knowledge of English but the practice or practical use of it. That they are knowledgeable about the language is evidenced by the distinctions and strong credits they obtained in their SPM[3] and STPM[4] English papers. What they have not possessed yet - due to lack of opportunity - is the ability to mobilise and manipulate their resources of English in solving communicative, conceptual or technical problems (Mountford, 1978). To appreciate this point, let's ponder upon this not-so-hypothetical scenario.

Ali and Abu are childhood friends who have been classmates throughout their schooling years. Both are similar in terms of their English proficiency level, having been subjected to the same style of learning and exposed to the same kind of language environment. At the end of their secondary schooling, Ali somehow manages to secure a scholarship to pursue a course at a university in the United Kingdom while Abu has to contend with a place at a local university for the same course. In the UK, Ali is subjected only to the usual preparatory English course conducted over a couple of months prior to his study proper while back home Abu is required to do courses upon courses of English. When they meet again after a year, Ali is more likely to show a greater mastery of English. He will not only speak more fluently and accurately but also confidently, outspokenly and probably with a twang. Abu, on the other hand, is more likely to remain the Abu of the year before, linguistically speaking.

So what happens in that one year? From the moment he sets foot in the UK, Ali is almost completely immersed in English and has to rely on whatever he has learned of English to effect a thousand and one functions. On the arrival day itself, he finds that he has challenging language tasks to perform beginning with trying to convince the immigration officer of the bona fide status of his visit. Then he has to ask for directions to get to the town his where university is; and when he meets his prospective landlord he has to negotiate on rentals and terms of stay. Having settled down, he has to explain to the grocer next-door what halal [5] means lest he buys haram [6] food from the shop. For each of his remaining days there, he finds that he has to mobilise and manipulate whatever little knowledge of English he has in order to understand the people around him and more importantly to be understood by them. By constantly falling on his language repertoire and receiving immediate feedback (from people with whom he communicates), he develops fluency, accuracy, confidence, and possibly outspokenness and the accent of the place. The challenges his environment presents create within him the urgency to retrieve learned knowledge of English stored at the back of his mind quickly. Abu, on the hand, does not have to go all through this beyond his classroom environment. All he has to do is sponge up stale inputs (stale because he has learned them in school) and regurgitate them out during tests. He lacks the urgency to recall learned language, thus his English proficiency stagnates. (For related reading on experiential view of learning, refer Saljo (1979) and Nunan (2000))

VG2223 aims to simulate as much of Ali's language immersion experience as possible in class and it does this through projects with emphasis on the usage (output) of English rather than the knowledge (input) of English, and productive skills rather than receptive skills. It assumes that students are already in possession of a corpus of language items (see Dudley-Evans, 1998) for the purpose of effecting meaningful and appropriate communication. It likens them to dormant language volcanoes ready to erupt and spew linguistic lava given the right conditions. Thus it sees the role of the instructor as providing these conditions (Abdullah et al, 1995) and facilitating the language eruption.

Rationale for Feature 3

It goes without saying that as one matures, one feels the need to be taken seriously, and among other things, this implies the desire to be treated as respectable

independent beings capable of making decisions and taking charge of one's life. In the learning context, students express this need by exercising choices in their adherence to instructions. For example, they might do some but not all the activities instructed or complete none of the assignments given; on the other hand, they might attend lessons not required or perform tasks not expected of them. Sadly, this element of choice is often interpreted negatively as recalcitrance - for which students are punished - when it could also be viewed as a positive expression of human individuality. Nunan (2000) claims that learning will be enhanced if learners are given the opportunities to negotiate aspects of their learning. Meanwhile Davies and Currie (1971) suggest that learners' views and wishes are important considerations in course design, for if these are not built into it, learners will derive no satisfaction in their learning. VG2223 adopts a negotiated learning approach specifically to accommodate students' need to be idiosyncratic. It gives them the benefit of the doubt with regards to their hidden agendas or the personal syllabuses that they follow. It taps on their affective factors such as motivation, interests, attitude and personality that define their individuality. By giving them full charge over their learning, the hope is that students will learn what is relevant for them, in the way they learn best, and at the pace they are comfortable with.

With the view of leading students eventually to self-directed or autonomous kind of learning, this approach in no way implies lessening of responsibilities on the part of both the instructor and the students. The former, in fact, will find his job more challenging than ever, having to monitor students' activities and progress at all times, a task that requires patience and dexterity. Although input is not stressed now, he is still expected to be able to supply relevant input as and when necessary. On the other hand, for the flexibility given to them, students are expected to produce work that is up-to-date, thorough and wide in scope.

This approach has many spin-offs. Among others, it:

allows students to learn from peers as they will be working in groups

motivates them by instilling a sense of pride and responsibility in their learning

gives them the opportunity to experiment with various learning strategies so that they become creative in the work they have to produce

helps to build up their confidence through independent learning

reinforces their sense of self-worth

Course Outline

I shall now present an outline of VG2223.

1 Description

This course is designed for any students, especially from science and engineering disciplines, who wish to put into practice all the skills they have gained from their earlier courses to perform occupational tasks in English. Projects are the mainstay of

this course. Through them, students will have ample opportunities to practise the four skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening, acquired from previous learning, and to apply their knowledge of grammar in order to effect communication in English in authentic situations. Learner-centred and task-based in approach, this course requires students to take charge of their learning with the teacher's role being only to facilitate the process.

2 Objective

At the end of this course, students should be able to communicate effectively in English using the skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening, in situations resembling their future working environment.

3 Text

3.1 Given the learner-centred approach to be adopted, and more importantly, the heterogeneous make-up of the class, no particular textbook will be prescribed for the students. Instead, they will be required to select and bring learning materials from their own discipline to class. The suitability and relevance of the materials, however, must be checked, and as all the materials will essentially be for content references, the teacher might need to consult subject specialists.

3.2 As for the teacher, it is important for him/her to be equipped with materials that will help in facilitating the students' learning. The following references are therefore recommended:

a) Huckin, T N; Olsen, L A, English For Science And Technology - A handbook for non-native speakers, McGraw-Hill: Singapore (1991)

b) Langan, H, College Writing Skills, McGraw-Hill: Singapore (1987)

c) Zimmerman, F, English For Science, Prentice Hall Regents: Englewood Cliffs, NJ (1989)

4 Approach

A negotiated learning approach will be adopted in this course. Students will be doing projects (see below) where their already acquired skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening will be put into practice. Language input from the teacher will be given minimally to reinforce students' accuracy.

5 Evaluation

5.1 Students will be evaluated through three project works, one final examination paper and class participation.

5.2 The skills of writing and speaking will be evaluated in the projects while the final examination paper will only assess students' reading skills. Due to practical constraints, students' listening skills will only be evaluated "loosely", i.e. through observing their responses in class participation.

5.3 To inject fun and creative and competitive spirits into students' learning, the evaluation of each project will also include a design component, which is central to any kind of project.

5.4 Evaluation will be based on the following weights:

Project work 1 10%
Project work 2 20%
Project work 3 20%
Final examination 40%
Participation/Team work 10%

6 Attendance

6.1 Attendance is compulsory for all students on days when the teacher is giving input, i.e. in every first session of the week.

6.2 On consultation days, i.e. in the second session of the week, only those groups of students who have been scheduled for the session will be required to be present, the rest having the option of either attending class or otherwise, without having their attendance jeopardised in any way. This flexibility, given to all groups on a rotational basis, is to spare the non-scheduled groups the boredom of waiting in class, the time for which is better spent completing their projects in their own privacy.

6.3 A class attendance of 70% or more (inclusive of the allowance for the absence above) throughout the semester is required before students are allowed to sit for the final examination paper.

Description of Project Work

1 Introduction

Students will be working in groups of four or five for each project, and they will be working in the same group throughout the course. Therefore, it is very important that they choose very carefully with whom they want to work at the beginning of the first project. No changes in membership will be allowed once groups have been formed. Ideally, groups should be formed on the basis of interest, discipline, ease of meeting and personality of group members.

2 Themes

Essentially, each project is a problem-solving activity. The teacher will give the theme of the project in terms of a situation, NOT as a specific topic. This is to encourage students to interpret the problem, and propose its solution, according to their own specialisation. Alternatively, students may choose their own themes for Projects 2 and 3 but again these must be phrased as situations . For eaxample:

Your class fronts a busy road just like the ones at the FSKK block. The noises generated by the traffic plying the road, especially the shuttle-buses and motorcycles, plus the noise from the gardener's mowers and trimmers are incessantly loud and

irritating, making it impossible for any lesson to be conducted. Solve this noise problem before it completely disrupts your studies.

3 Stages

3.1 Each project entails three main stages:

3.1.1 Literature Review

Here, students are expected to read as much literature as possible related to the problem at hand. The relevance of the material will depend very much on their interpretation of the problem, and the kind of solution they have in mind.

3.1.2 Report Write-up

When they have gathered enough information from their reading and have thought out a viable solution to the problem, students will start writing up a report documenting:

the nature of the problem and their purpose for solving it,

their interpretation and analysis of the problem,

the solution proposed and the design principles behind it (based on the findings from their Literature Review), and

their recommendation for its adoption.

3.1.3 Show & Tell

Here, students will present their work verbally and visually, i.e. by using media such as pictures, posters, computers, videos and so on. Besides these, they are also encouraged to demonstrate their products so as to convince the audience of their viability. However, students should never be coerced into incurring large personal expenses solely for this purpose unless, of course, they willingly choose to do so.

3.2 Students' progress will be monitored through an interim presentation and a series of consultations. The former requires students or rather groups to update each other on work done since the inception of the project up to the stage of proposing the solution. On the other hand, consultations will see students thrashing out their problems, and the teacher giving specific guidance on matters such literature review, report write-up and oral presentation. Both the interim presentation and consultations will be conducted on the non-input days.

4 Marking Scheme

For the purpose of marking projects, only the language skills of writing and speaking, and the non-language component of design will be considered with the following weights:

Writing Speaking
Design

Project 1
4% 4%
2%

Project 2
9% 9%
2%

Project 3
9% 9%
2%

Feedback

Feedback from students on this course has been wide and varied. Generally, those who favour the approach are grateful for the opportunities it has given them to use English as a tool to perform tasks that they would not have done otherwise. They feel that their use of English has been purposeful, and that they could see the importance of falling back on their knowledge of English as they tried to make meanings of the texts they encountered in the course of carrying out their projects. The more enterprising students even see the course as an opportunity to kill two birds with one stone, i.e. completing projects from their major studies in this class. Others think that the independence and autonomy that the course has given them has taught them to be creative and critical in their thinking. Yet others simply cherish the experience of working in teams with people they like, doing topics of common interest. On the negative side, some students feel disoriented by the lack of structure in the course. They ere probably those who have been accustomed to either being spoon-fed or learning without application. There have also been complaints of excessive work load, that the projects are time-consuming and taxing physically and mentally.

As for the instructors, there are not many of them to begin with, proving how unpopular ESP still is among teachers. Those who accepted the challenge and have stayed on were very apprehensive at the beginning as expected. Not having a textbook to bring to class was the greatest fear they felt and not knowing the subject matter compounded their insecurity. However, confidence began to sink in after a while and now there are indications they are enjoying their new role as facilitators. Seeing how well some students fit in with the approach in particular has shattered their preconceptions about students' learning styles and preferences. The main complaint from facilitators is that they have to be ever ready in class because they do not know what assistance students might need from them in class - their new role requires them to react rather than pro-act. Another setback is that he has more marking to do as writing features prominently in the course.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have focused on methodology because it is the one strand of ESP that has been shunned by many. I have tried to justify the one used in VG2223 (English

for Applied Sciences II) based on my personal experience, observations and common sense. If it seems unconventional, it is because it has to address a situation that looks conventional but is actually not, and I believe ESP is not a conventional phenomenon. As I have said earlier, this course offers a way out of the quandary many ESP instructors find themselves in. I hope it has done so without compromising the tenets of ESP.

I would like to end by referring to Ruggiero (1988), whose view on the role of ESP teachers coincides with mine. He calls them coaches while I see them as facilitators. In his book, Teaching Thinking Across the Curriculum, he lists some essential activities of an academic coach which sum up what VG2223 aspires to do. They are:

"To break that habit many students have of leaning inordinately on the instructor and the textbook"

"To create an atmosphere conducive to creative and critical thinking . . . in which students are willing to be adventurous in their thinking"

"To provide frequent challenges in the form of problems and issues appropriate to students' level of intellectual development"

To allow them to struggle with problems and issues to develop strategies for dealing with confusion and frustration . . ." (97)

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[1] Kurikulum Baru Sekolah Rendah : The New Curriculum for Primary Schools in Malaysia

[2] Kurikulum Baru Sekolah Menengah: The New Curriculum for Secondary Schools in Malaysia

[3] Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia: Malaysian Certificate of Education equivalent to the GCE-O Level

[4] Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia: Malaysian Higher Certificate of Education equivalent to GCE-A Level

[5] A state of being acceptable according to Islamic laws (similar to the concept of kosher in Judaism)

[6] A state of being forbidden according to Islamis laws (similar to being non-kosher in Judaism)