

Syllabus design in english language teaching education essay



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Abstract

It is debatable whether ESP has a distinctive methodology and syllabus. This paper argues that methodology and syllabus design in English Language Teaching (ELT) and ESP differ little and that it is not possible to say whether general ELT has borrowed ideas for methodology from ESP or whether ESP has borrowed ideas from general ELT. Two characteristic features of ESP methodology are identified: ESP can base activities on students' specialism, and ESP activities can have a truly authentic purpose derived from students' target needs. Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) maintain that what characterizes ESP methodology is the use of tasks and activities reflecting the students' specialist area.

Introduction

"In the 1970s, EFL teachers first ventured out of the Arts Faculty and the 'gentle landscape of language and literature' into 'the land beyond the mountains inhabited by illiterate and savage tribes called scientists, businessmen and engineers'", wrote Ramsden (2002). In the light of this quotation, Ramsden pours his scorn over the turning point in the history of language teaching from art to science; and from English for general purposes (EGP) to English for specific purposes (ESP). Though ESP emanates from EGP, it has established itself as a distinct trend. The distinctions between ESP and EGP are quite fuzzy. To clarify the issue, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) pointed out that there is no difference in theory, but in practice, there is a great deal.

This paper delves deeply into the literature of ESP and EGP to uncover their points of similarities and differences, chiefly at the level of syllabus design , methodology and instructional materials. For the sake of clarification, theoretical preliminaries will be provided from the outset. As expected, the current paper is comparative in nature and selective in illustration.

Theoretical Preliminaries:

Definitions of:

EGP:

According to Blackwell, EGP is polarized with ESP (English for specific purposes) to refer to contexts such as the school where needs cannot readily be specified. This view is misleading, since purpose is always inherent. EGP is more usefully considered as providing a broad foundation rather than a detailed and selective specification of goals.

EGP, then, refers to that basic linguistic code that could be used in larger context and in everyday conversation. It does not take into account neither the requirements of a workplace nor needs of learners. Being general in its nature, EGP holds a sway at the core level of language instruction.

ESP

According to Longman dictionary of applied linguistics, ESP refers to the role of English in a language course or program of instruction in which the content and aims of the course are fixed by the specific needs of a particular group of learners. For example courses in English for academic purposes, English for science and technology, and English for Nursing.

In this regards, ESP is chiefly associated with special language or register. However, Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p. 19) claimed that “ ESP is not a particular kind of language or methodology, nor does it consist of a particular type of teaching material. Understood properly, it is an approach to language teaching.”

From the above definitions, one can notice that there is no absolute clear cut between ESP and EGP. To ask which one embraces the other is likely to generate divergent views. In an attempt to answer this question, Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p. 18) have drawn a tree of ELT where the ESP is just one branch of EFL/ESL, which are themselves the main branches of English Language teaching in general..

However, A closer gaze at the tree and to the ramifications of ESP and EGP uncovers the distinctive features of each. These features will be tackled in subsequent section.

Distinctive features of ESP and EGP:

Despite the overlapping connections between EGP and ESP, there are several differences at the level of their concerns and practices.

First, the focus in ESP is on training students to conform well to the requirements of the workplace; whereas, in EGP, the main focus is on education. Widdowson (1983) sees the difference between Education and Training as that of creativity versus conformity (in White, 1988: p. 18).

Second, Designing a course content in EGP is much more difficult than in ESP for the difficulty of predicting the future needs of EGP students. Knowing

about only learners survival needs is quite unbeneficial because it may lead to an oversimplified language, unauthentic communicative structure and unrealistic situational content.

Third, ESP learners are usually adults with an average mastery of English language. Their main purpose is to communicate and learn a set of professional skills. In EGP, the age of learners , however, varies from childhood to adulthood. Their chief purpose behind learning English is to achieve communication in the basic everyday communication.

At the level of macro-skills, the four language skills are integrated and reinforced in EGP instruction, while in ESP the selection of language skills is based on needs analysis. For instance, in studying English for science and technology, the emphasis is on context and subject of the course.

At the level of micro skills, EGP has shed too much attention to teaching of grammar and language structure; yet the focus in ESP is on the context and subject of the course.

Finally, a distinctive feature of ESP classroom is team- teaching, where the teacher of language collaborates with subject teacher in the delivery of the lesson. This feature is , however, absent in EGP classroom where the language teacher seems sufficient to instruct broad themes.

To sum up, though ESP stems from EGP, it has preserved for itself distinctive characteristics as outlined before. To sum up, Stevens states that ESP has four absolute characteristics:

1. Is designed to meet specific needs.

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2. Is related to themes and topics particular to occupation.
3. Is centered on language appropriate to those activities, in terms of lexis, syntax, discourse pragmatics, semantics and so on.
4. The above is in contrast to General English (Stevens 1988 in Dudley-Evans & St. John 1998: p. 4).

In the subsequent section, the paper will take both EGP and ESP a stage further to list the similarities and differences at the level of syllabus design. To facilitate the process of comparing and contrasting, an example of each course content will be highlighted.

Syllabus design in EGP

A syllabus refers to a particular plan of a course. It is a document that details the structure and operation of one's class. It can also be called the basic reference document that guides students and the instructor through a course (Breen 1984). In the current section, this section aims to uncover the salient types of syllabus adopted in EGP and ESP based on contents of two textbooks: Natural English(EGP textbook) and English for Careers: Tourism, (ESP textbook)

Based on their observations of general English language courses, Brown (1995) and Richards (1990) list the following types of syllabuses. They also point out that courses are often based on a combination of:

Structural (organized primarily around grammar and sentence patterns).

Functional (organized around communicative functions, such as identifying, reporting, correcting, describing).

Notional (organized around conceptual categories, such as duration, quantity, location).

Topical (organized around themes or topics, such as health, food, clothing).

Situational (organized around speech settings and the transactions associated with them, such as shopping, at the bank, at the supermarket).

Skills (organized around microskills, such as listening for gist, listening for specific information, listening for inferences).

Task- or activity-based (organized around activities, such as drawing maps, following directions, following instructions).

Extract. 1: Contents of Natural English ,

As can be observed in the content of Natural English, one of the main aims of the textbook is to enable General English learners to improve the four language skills, especially speaking and listening to everyday English. Yet, the integration of the four language skills is not the sole distinctive feature of the textbook.

The contents of course book also seem to respond to the general wants of GE learners in that it all covers functions, notions, vocabulary and grammar. Each unit introduces GE learners to notions, functions and grammatical structures in an equal weight of emphasis. Thus, a point that one can infer is

that EGP syllabus is integrative. Language skills as well as functions, notions, forms and semantic entries are all fused together.

For example, in unit 2, the book introduces notions such as “ shopping” and “ work. Concerning functions, expressing request and responding with sympathy are the main functions found in unite 1. The grammatical forms are so varied from using the present continuous to passive voice. What is so remarkable is that the communication of a notion entails the use of adequate target functions.

From the design of Natural English, it is evident that the units are organized on topics. Unit one is on Cartoon Mobile Invasion, unit two on Joke lost in desert, and three on Cartoon Perfect Day. However, a striking existence of situations looms chiefly in extended speaking. Students are in front several situations, such as on train , on holiday, and are encouraged to interact , following the necessities of imagined communicative setting.

To conclude, the pertinent remark we can deduce from the course content of EGP is that its syllabus is integrative and synthetic in nature. Functions, notions , forms, situations and skills gain enough space in the EGP syllabus. Nevertheless, these elements are tackled more broadly. For instance, It seems that the subjects are too general, the functions and notions are recurrent in daily life issues, and language skills are not relevant to any professional field.

Now ,

ESP makes extensive use of content-based approaches. According to Master and Brinton (1998), CBI has the following features. The syllabus is organized around subject content; for example, in English for Careers: Tourism, an ESP textbook, the subject matter is on a number of topics from tourism, such as Registration Client perceptions and supply and demand. Teaching activities are specific to the subject matter being taught and are geared to stimulate students to think and learn through the use of the target language.

Language is viewed holistically, and learners learn from working with whole chunks of language and multiple skills.

Content-based approaches reject 'synthetic' approaches to course design—the idea that language or skills can be atomized into discrete items to be presented and practiced by learners one at a time. The approach makes use of authentic texts to which learners are expected primarily to respond in relation to the content. It has been argued (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987) that once we remove the text from its original context, it loses some of its authenticity. For example, the intended audience is changed once the authentic text is imported into the classroom. Authenticity also relates also to the reader's purpose in reading the text. For example, recommendation reports for the purchase of technical equipment are, in their original context of use, devised for the purpose of helping the reader decide which of two or more items of equipment to buy. If, however, a recommendation report is transported into a language teaching classroom and students are given an activity whose purpose is to answer comprehension questions on it, the match between text and task is artificial.

Content-based instruction tries to avoid some of these potential problems by using content (authentic texts) in ways that were similar to those in real life. Content-based approaches involve also the integration of skills. Writing often follows on from listening and reading, and students are often required to synthesize facts and ideas from multiple sources as preparation for writing (Brinton et al., 1989).

In fact, ESP syllabi (in this case an English Vocational Purposes syllabus) differ from English General Purposes (EGP) syllabi, both in goals and content. Below is an outline of some major differences adapted from Widdowson (1983 in White 1988: pp. 18 & 26), Hutchinson & Waters (1987) and Stevens (1988) (both in Dudley-Evans & St. John 1998: pp. 2-4).

The ESP syllabus must be based on a previous analysis of the students' needs, which includes not only an analysis of the situations in which the language will be used and of the language appropriate in these situations, but also an analysis of the students' wants and subjective needs.

The whole business of the management of language learning is far too complex to be satisfactorily catered for by a pre-packaged set of decisions embodied in teaching materials. Quite simply, even with the best intentions no single textbook can possibly work in all situations. (Sheldon, 1987: 1) If we are to prescribe content, we need to ask, whose content?

Methodology

Having uncovered the nuances existing between ESP and EGP syllabi, This current chapter will move a stage further to draw a comparison and contrast

at level of methodology, chiefly at the types of techniques employed by each and the roles they played in serving the students needs.

As defined by Robinson (1991), methodology refers to what goes on in the classroom and to what students have to do. Using technical terms, it refers to classroom activities and techniques. There are too many techniques which largely emerged in EGP classroom such as tasks, role play, simulations, and so on and so forth. These techniques soon adopted by ESP practitioners .

Concerning tasks, Little John and Hicks () noticed that valuable tasks in EGP have certain characteristics: they ' should be motivating and absorbing; and exploit learners prior knowledge'. In ESP, the above criteria are also predominant, but what is specific here is that ESP tasks comprise linguistic and professional skills. For instance, medical students studying English may be assigned to carry out a series of operations as outlined below:

Moreover, the role play and simulations are used differently in ESP and EGP. While dealing with simulatons in ESP, Strutridge() noticed that they were originally used in business and military training with focus on outcome rather than the means -language- of training. In EGP, the outcome was , however, less important than the means used to achieve fluency. One should not perceive hastily that means in esp have no disregarded. Stutridge concludes that in ESP end is as important as the means.

Taking case studies into account, Nunan in an outsanding research tested the validity of the technique to ESP course. He found out that it helps ESP students to draw upon their professional skills, utilizing the cognitive and behavioral styles of their work rather than of traditional language classroom.

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Case studies may prove difficult to be conducted by EGP learners if we take into consideration their younger age and Worse of al their professional immaturity. For ESP students who are not fully qualified in their profession, the use of case studies help to induct them into some aspects of professional culture (Charles 337, pp. 28-31)

Project work is out-of-class activity used in both ESP and EGP classroom. However, Fried() observed the more advanced examples of project work would be appropriate for ESP.

A final technique which is common in ESP and EGP as well is the oral presentations. Usually, they are the culmination of project or case studies conducted outside the threshold of classroom. The utility of such activity is that it trains students to develop their self autonomy and master the four skills of the target language. Word processor and PowerPoint become familiar means for presentations,

Succinctly, the methodology endorsed by ESP is quite similar to that of EGP chiefly if we consider the types of techniques and activities . Yet, the ways in which techniques are employed in ESP differ a lot from that in EGP.

the next chapter will attempt to decipher how material design becomes a site of innovation after the emergence of ESP. Being in its heyday, ESP materials assume a divergent way from EGP. ESP designers come up with in-house materials quite plausible to the students needs more than the General ready-made textbooks which hold their strength in EGP classrooms.

Materials Design

One of the common characteristics of material design in ESP is the existence of an established tradition of ESP teachers producing in-house materials. These materials are the outcome of needs analysis. The tailor made material accounts to the learners needs more than a general textbook can do., However, several questions may emerge to the surface:

What are the major factors behind the over-existence of in-house materials in ESP in contrast to its acute shortage in EGP?

-what are the key features that distinguish ESP materials from EGP?

One of the key factors behind the profusion of in-house materials in ESP is because of its reliance on needs analysis. Need analysis is rarely carried out in GL classroom. This is partly because of the difficulty of specifying GL learners and partly because of a lack of literature on the particularities of analyzing needs data. Needs analysis tends to be associated with ESP and is neglected in GE classroom. Hutchinson and Waters(1987, p. 53-54) say that “ what distinguishes ESP from GE is not the existence of a need as such but rather an awareness of the need... for the time being, the tradition persists in GE that learners needs cannot be specified and as a result no attempt is usually made to discover learners true needs. Secondly, The fact that ESP materials are tailored to the needs of specific group of learners makes its absolute adoption by other ESP teachers futile. ‘ Even when suitable materials are available, it may not be possible to buy them because of import restrictions’ pointed out Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p.).

If textbooks are more available in EGP than in ESP, ESP textbooks have not been immune from criticism. Ever and Boys (p. 57) mount a strong attack on the EST textbooks suggesting that most of them are designed for, or are the outcome of, remedial or supplementary courses and assume that students already possess a knowledge of English.... unhappily, this is not at all understood by potential users, especially in developing countries abroad where the greatest demand for EST exists'. Another strongly worded attack was that the heavy concern of ESP practitioners with methodology and approach leads them to ignore issues such the accuracy of explanations , validity of examples and suitability of linguistic content.

Because ESP materials are relevant to target needs, This may increase the motivation of ESP students, but there are other aspects which are also highly important, such as Waters (1987: 48) put it, " ESP, as much as any good teaching, needs to be intrinsically motivating. (...) Students should get satisfaction from the actual experience of learning, not just from the prospect of eventually using what they have learnt". The following task, for instance, could be interesting for Engineering students:.

Another characteristic of ESP materials is that it is more authentic than EGP materials. The latter might be produced for the purpose of teaching language, while in ESP authenticity refers to the materials used in the students' specialist workplace or study institution. Additionally, for ESP authentic text selection usually follow the needs analysis.

To conclude, the whole business of language learning management is far too complex to be satisfactorily catered for by a pre-packaged set of decisions
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embodied in teaching materials. Quite simply, even with the best intentions no single textbook can possibly work in all situations.(Sheldon, 1987: 1).

However, designing tailor made materials would in principle be motivating, authentic and innovative.

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted some of the issues involved in ESP curriculum development. It can be argued that language varieties are based in and extend from a common core of language. Or it can be argued that language varieties are self-contained entities. Needs analysis can be seen as an entirely pragmatic and objective endeavour to help course developers identify course content that is truly relevant to the learners, or it can be argued to have a bias in favour of the institutions and may overemphasize objective needs at

the cost of subjective needs. It can be argued that syllabuses should specify content (what is to be taught). Or it can be argued that they should specify method (how language is to be taught). Some argue that the ESP courses should be as narrow-angled as possible. Others argue that this is not practica

EST is in a parlous state and is being abandoned by many tertiary institutions who, like Sultan Qaboos University, found that ' the English teachers seemed to learn a lot of science, but the students didn't seem to learn much English'