English for specific purposes essay

2 The development of ESP The best laid schemes o’ mice and men Gang aft a-gley. (Robert Burns) From its early beginnings in the 1960s ESP has undergone three main phases of development. It is now in a fourth phase with a fifth phase starting to emerge. We shall describe each of the five phases in greater detail in later chapters, but it will provide a useful perspective to give a brief summary here. It should be pointed out first of all that ESP is not a monolithic universal phenomenon.

ESP has developed at different speeds in different countries, and examples of all the approaches we shall describe can be found operating somewhere in the world at the present time. Our summary must, therefore, be very general in its focus. It will be noticeable in the following overview that one area of activity has been particularly important in the development of ESP. This is the area usually known as EST (English for Science and Technology). Swales (1985) in fact uses the development of EST to illustrate the development of ESP in general: ‘ With one or two exceptions...

English for Science and Technology has always set and continues to set the trend in theoretical discussion, in ways of analysing language, and in the variety of actual teaching materials. ‘ We have not restricted our own illustrations to EST in this book, but we still need to acknowledge, as Swales does, the pre-eminent position of EST in the ESP story. 1. The concept of special language: register analysis This stage took place mainly in the 1960s and early 1970s and was associated in particular with the work of Peter Strevens (Haliiday, Mcintosh and Strevens, 1964), Jack Ewer (Ewer and Latorre, 1969) and John Swales (1971).

Operating on the basic principle that the English of, say, Electrical Engineering constituted a specific register different from that of, say, Biology or of General English, the aim of the analysis was to identify the grammatical and lexical features of these registers Teaching materials then took these linguistic features as their syllabus A good example of such a syllabus is that of A Course in Basic Scientific-English by Ewer and Latorre (1969) (see below p. 26). In fact, as Ewer and Latorre's syllabus shows, egister analysis revealed that there was very little that was distinctive in the sentence grammar of Scientific English beyond a tendency to favour particular forms such as the present simple tense, the passive voice and nominal compounds. It did not, for example, reveal any forms that were not found in General English. But we must be wary of making unfair criticism. Although there was an academic interest in the nature of registers of English per se, the main motive behind register analyses such as Ewer and Latorre's was the pedagogic one of making the ESP course more relevant to learners' needs.

The aim was to produce a syllabus which gave high priority to the language forms students would meet in their Science studies and in turn would give low priority to forms they would not meet, Ewer and Hughes-Davies (1971), for example, compared the language of the texts their Science students had to read with the language of some widely used school textbooks. They found that the school textbooks neglected some of the language forms commonly found in Science texts, for example, compound nouns, passives, conditionals, anomalous finites (i. e. mod-.! verbs).

Their conclusion was that the ESP course should, therefore, give precedence to these forms. 2. Beyond the sentence: rhetorical or discourse or analysis

There were, as we shall see, serious flaws in the register analysis-based syllabus, but, as it happened, register analysis as a research procedure was rapidly overtaken by developments in the world of linguistics. Whereas in the first stage of its development, ESP had focussed on language at the sentence level, the second phase of development shifted attention to the level above the sentence, as ESP became closely involved with the emerging field of discourse or rhetorical analysis.

The leading lights in this movement were Henry Widdowson in P

Presenting information on experimental proceaures C. The specilic rhetorical functions that develop the general rhetorical functions of Level B EXAMPLES' 1. Description: physical, function, and process 2. Definition 3. Classification 4. instructions 5Visuat-verbal relationships D. The rhetorical techniques thai provide relationships within and between the rhetorical units of Level C EXAMPLES: I Orders 1. Time order 2. Space order 3. Causality and result II Patterns 1. Causality and result 2. Order of importance 3. Comparison and contrast . Analogy 5. Exemplification 6. Illustration rhetorical patterns of text organisation differed significantly between specialist areas of use: the thetorical structure of science texts was tegarded as different from that of commercial texts, for example. However, this point was never very clearly examined (see Swales, 1985, pp. 70-1) and indeed paradoxically, the results of the tesearch into the discourse of subject-specific academic texts were also used to make obsetvations about discourse in general (Widdowson, 1978).

The typical teaching matetials based on the discourse approach taught students to recognise textual patterns and discourse markers mainly by means of text-diagramming exercises (see below p. 36). The English in Focus series (OUP) is a good example of this approach. 3 Target situation analysis The stage that we come to consider now did not really add anything new to the range of knowledge about ESP. What it aimed to do was to take the existing knowledge and set it on a more scientific basis, bv establishing procedures for relating language analysis more closely to learners' reasons for learning.

Given that the purpose of an ESP course is to enable learners to function adequately in a target situation, that is, the situation in which the learners will use the language they are learning, then the ESP course design process should proceed by first identifying the target situation and then carrying out a rigorous analysis of the linguistic features of that situation. The identified features will form the syllabus of the ESP course. This process is usually known as needs analysis. However, we prefer to take

Chambers' (1980) term of ' target situation analysis', since it is a more accurate description of the process concerned. The most thorough explanation of target situation analysis is the system set out by John Munby in Communicative Syllabus Design (1978). The Munby model produces a detailed profile of the learners' needs in terms of communication purposes, communicative setting, the means of communication, language skills, functions, structures etc. (see below p. 55). The target situation analysis stage marked a certain ' coming of age" for ESP.

What had previously been done very much in a piecemeal way was now systematised and learner need was apparently placed at the centre of the course design process. It proved in the event to be a false dawn. As we shall see in the following chapters, the concept of needs that it was based on was far too simple 4. Skills and strategies We noted that in the first two stages of the development of ESP all the analysis had been of the surface forms of the language (whether at sentence level, as in register analysis, of above, as in discourse analysis).

The target situation analysis approach did not really change this, because in its analysis of learner need it still looked mainly at the surface linguistic features of the target situation. The fourth stage of ESP has seen an attempt to look below the surface and to consider not the language itself but the thinking processes that underlie language use. There is no dominant figure in this movement, although we might mention the work of Francoise Grellet (1981), Christine Nuttall (1981) and Charles Alderson and Sandy Urquhart 19S4 as having made significant contributions to work on reading skills.

Most of the work in the area of skills and strategies, however, has been done close to the ground in schemes such as the National ESP Project in Brazil (see below p. 171) and the University of Malaya ESP Project I see ELT Documents 107 and Skills for Learning published by Nelson and the University of Malaya Press). Both these projects were set up to cope with study situations where the medium of instruction is the mother tongue but students need to read a number of specialist texts which are available only in English. The projects have, therefore, concentrated their efforts on reading strategies. The principal idea belli rid the skills-centred approach is that

underlying all language use there are common reasoning and interpreting processes, which, regardless of the surface forms, enable us to extract meaning from discourse. There is, therefore, no need to focus closely on the surface forms of the language. The focus should rather be on the underlying interpretive strategies, which enable the learner to cope with the surface forms, for example guessing the meaning of words from context, using visual layout to determine the type of text, exploiting cognates (i. e. ords which are similar in the mother tongue and the target language) etc. A focus on specific subject registers is unnecessary in this approach, because the underlying processes are not specific to any subject register. ‘ It was argued that reading skills are not language-specific but universal and that there is a core of language (for example, certain structures of argument and forms of presentation) which can be identified as ” academic ” and which is not subject-specific’ (Chitravelu, 1980) * It is interesting to note, however, that not all such projects have such a locus.

The ESP proiect at King Mongkut’s Institute of Technology in Bangkok, Thailand, for example, has to cope with a very similar study situation, but the focus here is on the full range of skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking). As kas bee»-noted, in terms of materials this approach generally puts the enpkaszs on reading or listening strategies. The characteristic exercises get the learners to reflect on and analyse how meaning is i» iOfJTTr1 in and retrieved from written or spoken discourse.

Taking char cue bom cognitive learning theories (see below p. 43), the language kaifJS are treated as thinking beings who can be asked to observe and ve*fcalrse the mtetpretive processes they employ in language use. 5 A

learning-centred approach in outlining the origins of ESP (pp. 6-8), we identified three forces, which we might characterise as need, new ideas about language and new ideas about learning. It should have become clear that in its subsequent development, however, scant attention has been paid to the last of these forces – learning.

All of the stages outlined so far have been fundamentally flawed, in that they are all based on descriptions of language use. Whether this description is of surface forms, as in the case of register analysis, or of underlying processes, as in the skills and strategies approach, the concern in each case is with describing what people do with language. But our concern in ESP is not with language use – although this will help to define the course objectives. Our concern is with language learning. We cannot simply assume that describing and exemplifying whar people do with language will enable someone to learn it.

If that were so. we would need to do no more than read a grammar book and a dictionary in order to learn a language. A truly valid approach to ESP must be based on an undetstandmg of the processes of language learning. This brings us to the fifth stage of ESP development – the learning-centred approach, which will form the^nbii^t^oftJTis _bopk. The importance and the implications oTtfie distinction that we have made between language use and language learning will hopefully become clear as we proceed through the following chaptets.