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An Evaluation of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) As a Modern Trend in English Language Teaching (ELT)

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Abstract

English Language Teaching (ELT) has come a long way, moving from grammatical or linguistic approach to communicative approach (which ESP is all about). This study looked into the origin, and development of ELT, the concept of English for specific purposes (ESP) as an approach to language teaching, and the differences between ESP and General English. Effort was also made at highlighting the steps in this modern trend in ELT which distinguishes from other trends, ranging from needs analysis, statement of goals and objectives of the language course, converting the needs into syllabus, and the evaluation of the teaching process. ESP was shown as a learner/learning-centred approach to the English language pedagogy.

Introduction

Earlier Approaches to ELT

English Language Teaching (ELT) came about as a result of learning and communication. English from the 16th century onwards, was the language used for exploration, trade, conquest and dominion. It was taught as a Mother Tongue (MT) for native speakers, as a Second or Foreign language for non-native speakers. English is Foreign Language (EFL) within a community when it has no special standing. It is seen just as another language used within that speech community. As a Second Language (ESL) English has a special standing. It is an acceptable language of legislature, a language of instruction in schools, a language of administration at different levels of government, and the language of print media. This is the status of English in Nigeria which is a multi-lingual society, and English was adopted as its second language.

It was EFL and ESL that later gave rise to English for specific Purposes (ESP). Many specific purposes which English language serves have their English language varieties illustrated in the diagram below and they include: English as a Mother Tongue (EMT), English as a Second Language (ESL) English as a Foreign Language (EFL), English for Specific Purposes (ESP), General English (GE), English for Science & Technology (EST), English for Business & Economics (EL English for Social Sciences (ESS) English for Academic Purposes (EAP), English for Occupational Purposes (EOP), English for Vocational Purposes (EVP), Vocational English for Second Language Learning (VESL), etc.

Traditionally, the teaching of English was a linguistic consideration to the utter disregard of the use the language will be put to. The aim of grammar then was to achieve linguistic or grammatical competence. Thus Radford (2002) states:

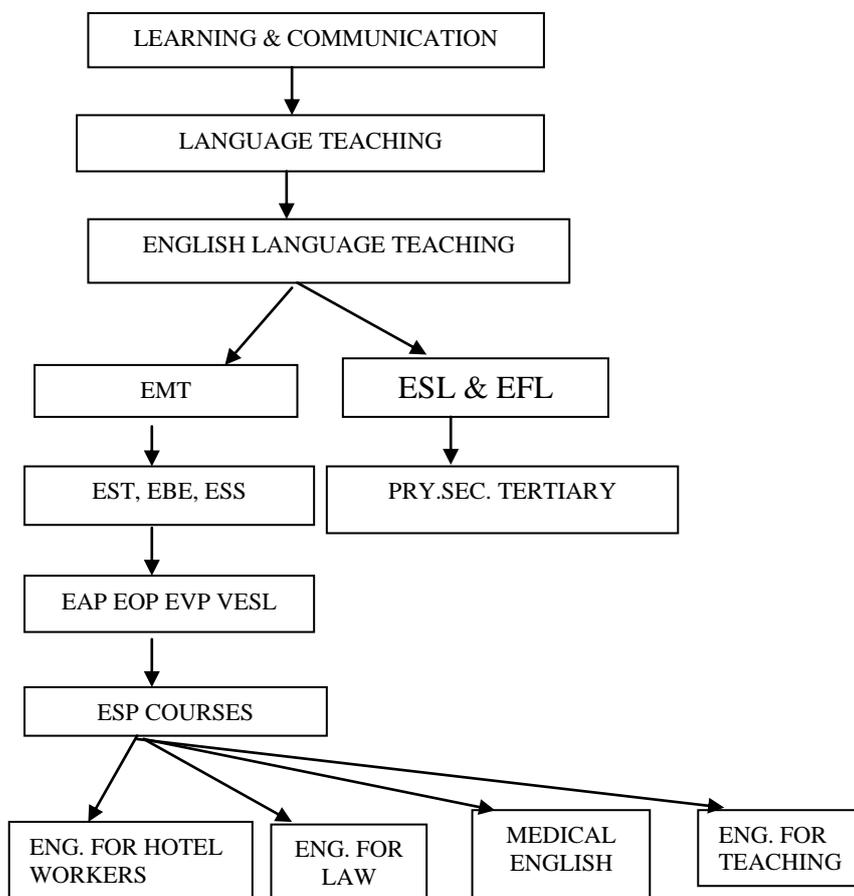
Traditionally, grammars set out to tell you what you need to know about a language in order to have native speaker competence in the language (i.e. to be able to speak the language like a native speaker): hence, it is clear that grammar is concerned with competence rather than performance (p. 2).

Grammatical rules were set out and grammatical structures were that of notions. The emphasis was then on the *who*, *what*, *where*, *why*, and *how* of our grammatical expressions. There was then no direct relationship between the form of a language and its meaning as they disregarded the fact that a form can yield more than one meaning (ambiguity) and a meaning can be realized through different forms (synonyms). The notion or concept of time could also be realized through other ways other than tense.

Against this backdrop, Widdowson (1978) noted that:

The aim of linguistics had been to describe the rules of English usages, that is, the grammar. However, new studies shifted attention away from defining the formal features of language usage to discovering the ways in which language is actually used in real communication (p. 7).

ELT Diagram



Source: Umera- Okeke, 2005, p. 6

It was this complicated nature of language teaching that raises the question of what is to be done. To study form or meaning? Should form be studied in relation to meaning? Or do we find out the important functions of language and then forms that

will enable us realize these functions? At a point in this dilemma in the history of ELT, say in the late 60s, the general thinking about language teaching shifted to the theories of functionalism and communicative competence. It was this shift that Crystal and Davy (1969) acknowledged when they noted that.

A particular social situation makes us respond with an appropriate variety of language and that as we move through the day, so the type of language we are using changes fairly instinctively with the situation (p.4).

Stevens (1977) lent credence to this when he stated that:

The current stages in the development of English concerns the emergence of a number of activities, movements and subjects that are carried out predominantly (though,) not exclusively in English (across the world) (p.57).

The concept of communicative competence according to Baldeh (1977),

aims at helping the learner turn his considerable dormant grammatical competence into a real practical mastery of the language, being engaged in such everyday activities as buying stamps, going to the cinema, asking the way, visiting the dentist, going shopping, asking the time etc. (p.43).

The emphasis here is on language used in varying situations. There began a shift from linguistic approach to language teaching and learning to the designing of learner-centred programmes so that the learner can cope in any situation he finds himself. The teacher or course designer must define very carefully the specific needs of the learner and then find out the best way(s) to enable him achieve those objectives. This was how English for specific purposes (ESP) came about.

What is ESP & how does it differ from General English (GE)?

ESP is the need to take into account from the very beginning the communicative purpose for which a language course is being designed. Such questions like: What will the language be used for? What is it that people want to do with language? are asked prior to the design of the course. It also shows that there are needs served by the variety of syntactic devices found in language. ESP therefore involves sieving out from our repertoire of language those syntactic structures relevant for a particular social situation. The syntactic structures one has chosen do not differ from that of General English (GE) but they were chosen because of the function they perform in specific situations such as medical fields, law courts, hotels, oil companies, science classrooms etc. The skills of the language used are presented in a general and

systematic way, that is, the way the grammatical system of a language was presented in the past.

The question then is “Is ESP different from EFL/ESL?” or “what distinguishes it from the General English or everyday English we know?” Schleppegrall and Bowman (1986) in answering this question said that the difference “lies in the learners and their purpose for learning” (p.68); for Hutchinson and Waters (1987), “the focus is on the learner” (p.8). Strevens stated that ‘special purpose English teaching are determined by the requirements of the learner rather than by external factors’ (qtd. in Kinsella, 1985, p.196). ESP is generally used to refer to the teaching of English for utilitarian purpose.

Hutchinson and Waters (1998) went further to define ESP as “an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner’s reason for learning” (p.20). The learner’s reason for learning is the determining factor. Strevens (1977) distinguished ESP from other methods of language teaching when he stated that:

Special purpose language teaching (SF—LT) occurs whenever the content and aims of the teaching are determined by the requirements of the learner rather than by external criteria (186).

This is in contrary to General English where the syllabus is pre-planned and the learner, often times too, the teacher have no input. General English is taught in primary, secondary and tertiary institutions with a syllabus handed down by the appropriate ministry to the teacher to implement. ESP is different in that, according to Robinson (1991),

Student study English not because they are interested in English language (‘or English Culture) as such but because they need English for study or work purpose (p.2).

English is therefore taught as a means to some specified end, which is the successful performance in work or study. Mackay and Mountford (1978) suggested three kinds of utilitarian purposes for which students learn English.

- * Occupational requirement for international telephone operations, civil airline, pilot etc.
- * Vocational training programme for hotel and catering staff, technical trades, etc.
- * Academic or professional study, engineering, medicine, law etc.

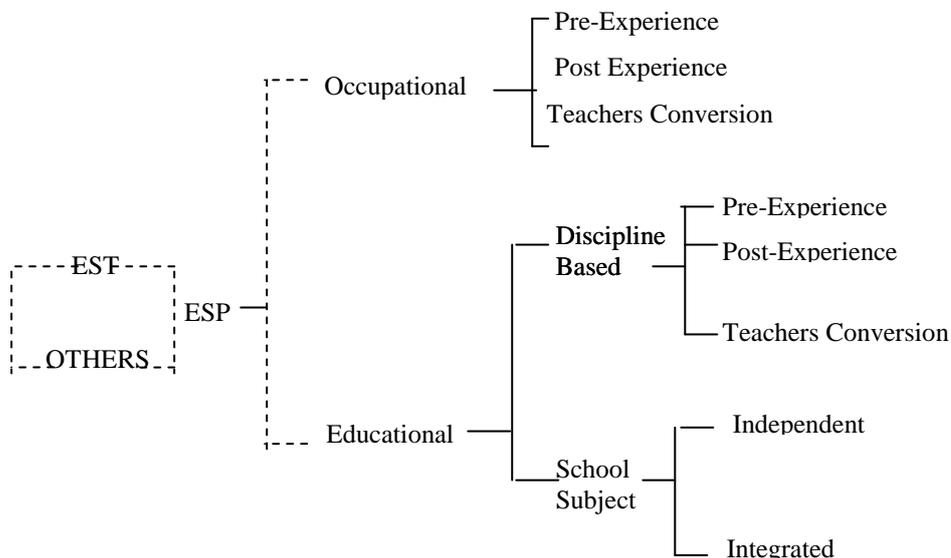
Munby (1978) divided ESP into two broad areas:

- * English for occupational purposes (EOP) ‘where the participant needs English to perform all or part of his occupational duties’ and
- * English for Educational purposes (English for Academic purposes or EAP) ‘where the participant needs English ... to pursue part or all his studies’ (p.2).

The training time could be pre-experience, post experience, teachers’ conversion, independent or integrated.

Strevens (1977) indicated this is the figure below:

Types of ESP and Training Time by Strevens



Source: Adapted from Umera-Okeke, 2005, p. 10

It is post-experience if the learner is already familiar with the job and is just adding relevant knowledge of English, e.g., English for hotel workers, English for traffic controllers.

Pre-experience indicates that that English for the job is being taught simultaneously with the learning of the job itself.

Teachers’ conversion courses simply mean re-training of teachers of other languages to enable them to convert to teaching English either additionally or alternatively.

Educational ESP varies according to the aims and framework within which it is offered. This brings about the distinction between ‘discipline based’ and ‘school subject’ ESP. Discipline based can only be obtained in tertiary level education where English is studied for academic purposes (EAP) while the school subject ESP is offered at the lower level of education such as primary and secondary levels. ESP should be taught as an independent subject or it could be integrated whereby a single syllabus integrates the learning of English with the learning of other subject (Umera-Okeke, 2005, pp.11-12).

Needs analysis in ESP

Needs analysis is one major factor that differentiates ESP from other approaches to language teaching. Because of the utilitarian nature of ESP, the course is based on analyzing the needs of the learner before designing a course for him. What should students do with English after learning it? What is the target situation and above all what is the course duration? Finding out the needs of the learner involves finding out his target and learning needs. While target needs include the necessities, lacks and wants of the learner, the learning needs look at “the route” to achieving these” (Hutchinson & Waters, in Johnson (ed.) 1989, pp.53, 56).

Learning needs examine how the learner achieves his goals of language learning. Jordan in Johnson (ed.) (1989, p.24) describes target and learning needs as goal-oriented and process-oriented needs respectively. Widdowson in Robinson (1991) used the terms ‘objective and ‘subjective needs’ (p.71). Brindly (1989) defined the narrow or product oriented needs as a situation “whereby the learner’s needs are seen solely in terms of the language they will have to use in a particular communication situation; the ‘broad or process-oriented needs’ he described as need in terms of the learning situation” (p.65).

Whatever the term used by these authors, ‘needs analysis’, according to Jordan (1977), ‘is the requirement for fact-finding or collection of data’ (p.22). The data could be collected through questionnaire, informal consultations with sponsors, learners, interviews, observation, case study, tests and evaluations and others. Brindly sees needs analysis as ‘a vital pre-requisite to the specification of language learning objectives (In Johnson, (ed.), 1989 p.63).

Stating the goals & objectives in ESP

ELT in this modern trend does not end with needs analysis. The needs ascertained the ESP practitioner or teacher moves ahead to specify the goals and objectives of his training programme. What does he hope to achieve at the end of the teaching course? Based on his findings, a syllabus is designed.

ESP Syllabus

Having stated the goals and objectives, the information gathered from needs analysis is translated into syllabus design. Munby (1978) called that to convert needs into

syllabus content (vi). Hutchinson and Waters, (in Johnson (ed.) 1989) described a syllabus as ‘a document which says what will or at least what should) be learnt’ (80).

The syllabus could be designed in various ways:

- The structural or grammatical or linguistic syllabus,
- the notional syllabus and
- the functional syllabus

These are all linguistically based. They fail to provide the learner with the communicative use of the language. The move towards a communicative approach to language teaching in the 1970s and 1980s brought about alternative syllabus such as

- notional-functional syllabus (Wilkins, 1976:19),
- the task-based or procedural syllabus (Prabhu, 1987, p. 25) and
- the process syllabus (Breen, 1988, p. 58).

The modern approach to syllabus design advocates the specification of syllabus content in terms of learning activities and tasks as against the grammatical syllabus. The focus is mainly on the learning process and the teacher is concerned primarily with the teaching process such as preparation, practice presentation and evaluation. These kinds of syllabuses deal with either the methodology or the how of a language plus the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) with its emphasis on “systematic attention to functional as well as structural aspects of language” (Littlewood, 1984, p. 1).

Implementation

Furthermore, the ESP teacher does not stop at this. He goes ahead to implement the syllabus he has designed. This is the actual classroom teaching. Authentic texts and materials are used. Communicative methodology encourages games, role play, group and pair work, stimulating classroom activities. The syllabus should be task based.

Evaluation

The end of the teach-learning activity is marked by an evaluation and assessment of the syllabus. This is the measurement of the success and the overall workability or impracticability of the syllabus. As a syllabus provides both the teacher and student a guarantee that some grounds have been covered, it needs to be evaluated to find out how far it has succeeded in achieving the anticipated goal(s)

Criticism against ESP

This modern approach to language teaching implies that learners in different situations are studied and given the language variety beneficial to them in such situations. ESP is goal-directed. Language function is emphasized, as the belief is that

English is for communication and that what is important is language. Wilkins (1976, p. 5) criticized this notion. He said that identifying and starting with functions in language teaching is only possible when the learners are in a hurry and have limited time to study English. He is of the opinion that even if the grammar approach to language teaching is deficient, a functional approach could be used but first beginning with the grammar and graduating in language use, that is, a two stages affair. This is because grammatical foundation is very necessary. He stated:

It is essential for the learner to achieve some degree of generalization in what he has learned, and one of the essential elements of generalization is the grammar of the language itself. There is no way that one can know a language without knowing its grammatical basis (p.5).

He illustrated this with a child who had learned the rules of pluralisation in his grammar lesson being able to form plural of words he had never met before. He however suggested that a total departure from grammatical forms should not be made rather that:

The grammatical foundation can possibly be presented in new ways which also take the communicative purposes of language in account and provide the learner much more readily with a kind of language which he can make use of in actual communication (Wilkins, 1976:7).

Suffice it to say that Wilkins is right in his suggestion that grammar is the foundation in language learning, ESP, seen as a communicative language teaching differ in the sense that it is for adult learners most of whom have gotten that foundation and who know why they need English. The syllabus should be a functional one as against the linguistic syllabus. Again, because most of the adult ESP earners are on sponsored training like expatriates in oil companies, they seems to be in a hurry for that kind of foundation Wilkins is proposing, but would rather be given the language contents beneficial to them and replica of their target situations.

Conclusion

ESP is a communicative approach to language teaching. Unlike the earlier trends in ELT whereby the syllabus is a sacrosanct document handed down to the teacher to implement, in which the teacher has no input, information from ESP's needs analysis could be used to adjust the syllabus as it is an on-going process used for the refining and realizing the objectives of the language course.

It is also important to remember that needs analysis is not a once and for all affair. It should be a continuous process in which the conclusion drawn are constantly checked and reassessed.

Authentic texts and the task-based syllabus are advocated for in the classroom and the willing co-operation of the participants in the learning process encourages team-teaching between the content teacher and the ESP teacher. Finally, ESP as a recent trend in ELT has been discussed in this paper as communicative approach to language teaching as against the earlier linguistic approach to English language teaching.

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