

Identification of English for Specific Purpose (ESP) in its Ultimate Relation with Language Approaches

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Abstract:

This paper aims to explore the necessity of designing “ESP” courses based on the essential approaches as the learner’s needs analysis in order to improve the teaching atmosphere by providing a new learning context depending on students real needs. When the exceptional rapid expansion of science, business and technology called for an international language for specialists, “ESP” has witnessed a speedy and firm development, becoming nowadays one of the most important branches of English Language Teaching (ELT). In this paper the researcher attempts to provide a brief definition of English for Specific Purpose (ESP), and its ultimate relation with learner’s needs analysis(LNA), learner’s center approach and communicative approach which are essential in ESP syllabus design and mostly considered to be in appropriateness with the general objective of ESP courses “to enable learners to function adequately in a target situation”. Thus, that vital relation constructs the basis for ESP courses through which students’ needs can be fulfilled.

Key words: English for specific purpose(ESP), learner’s needs analysis(LNA), learner center approach, communicative approach

1. REVIEW

1.1. Development and definition of “ESP”

From the early 1960s, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has developed to become one of the most noticeable areas of EFL

teaching today. It specifies the focus on certain features of the language that are immediately associated with the restricted use of the target language which is required by the learner in order to achieve a particular purpose (Munby, 1978:2). A specialized aim refers to the purpose for which learners learn a language, not the nature of the language they learn. Consequently, the focus of the word special in ESP ought to be on the purpose for which learners learn and not on the specific registers they learn. The notion of a language with singular characteristics began to take root in the sixties and the early seventies, being associated with the pioneering research of Halliday, MacIntosh and Strevens (1964). Then, many distinguished linguists subscribed to the approach above, among them Widdowson (1983: 10) who states that “*ESP is simply a matter of describing a particular area of language and then using this description as a course specification to impart to learners the necessary restricted competence with this particular area*”.

ESP is supposed to be more focused and useful as compared to EGP (English for General Purposes). It concerns with the investigation of the learners' needs and it is greatly interested in preparing teaching materials, and methodologies (Dudly-Evans and St John 1998).

Widdowson (1981) also describes the general concept of ESP by stating that: “*If a group of learners' needs for a language can be accurately specified, then this specification can be used to determine the content of a language program that will meet these needs.*” It is obvious that the difference between “ESP” and “GE” is not a matter of the “existence” of a need; it is rather the “awareness” of a need. Some of these definitions are worthy referring to in this paper like Mackay and Mount Ford (1978:2) who defined “ESP” as: “*Languages for Special Purposes is generally used to refer to the teaching of English for a clearly utilitarian purpose. This purpose is usually defined*

with reference to some occupational requirement or vocational training programs or some academic or professional study.”

1.2. Components of ESP:

A general definition of ESP(English for Specific Purpose) with its different constituents was suggested to consider ESP as the basis for broad divisions such as: EAP(English for Academic Purposes), EOP (English for Occupational Purpose), EVP (English for Vocational Purposes), EPP (English for Professional Purpose) and EST (English for Science and Technology). Due to the greater need in the field of science the ‘EST’ is considered as the most important branch in ESP (Johns and Dudley-Evans 1993:116).

1.3. The Pedagogical Perspective of “ESP”

According to Anthony (1998), it was permitted after a 'heated' debate, to clarify and to state in a perhaps definitive way the definition of ESP in a conference held in Japan. It was the first Japan Conference on English for Specific Purposes which took place at Aizu University in Fukushima Prefecture in November(1997). This definition is so significant in that it is issued not only from a long period of controversies but also from the different debates all over the world which have helped the ESP movement to mature and to acquire the status it has today . In fact, it is Dudley-Evans (1997) in Japan who sets out during one hour an extended definition in terms of 'absolute' and 'variable' characteristics. Basically, this definition is deeply influenced by Strevens' definition (1988), but with some variations. Therefore, as 'absolute' characteristics, ESP is defined to meet specific needs of the learners. Firstly, the characteristics that concern with pedagogy, methodology or way of teaching and activities used to deliver and practice the target language in the classroom need to match the purposes of learning as Anthony(1998:122) explains: “*ESP makes use of underlying methodology and activities it serves.*” Then the

target language ought to be selected and measured to suit the pedagogical activities according to specific criteria. In other words these activities should match the learners' level and different language skills in grammar, vocabulary, speaking, study skills, and variety of academic fields. "*ESP is centered on the language appropriate to these activities in terms of grammar, lexis, register, study skills, discourse and genre.*" (Anthony, *ibid*). In comparison with the specification and stability of methodology in teaching GE the absolute characteristic reveals the flexibility of ESP which depends basically on learners' needs. In other hand, GE mostly follow the same methodology and activities for teaching and learning different English skills to diverse learners. "*ESP is in contrast with General English*", is removed for the simple reason that *ESP is not absolutely seen as being concerned with a specific discipline.*" (Anthony, *ibid*).

As the general objective of an ESP course is to "enable learners to function adequately in a target situation", we need to identify the *target situation*, i.e. the situation in which the learners will use the language. The target situation will vary, of course, from one group of specialists to another. This process of identifying learners' needs is usually known as *needs analysis* (according to Hutchinson and Waters) or *target situation analysis*. The general objective of ESP mentioned above emerged to certain the vital relation between ESP and (LNA) which is widely defined in the next section of this paper.

2. LEARNER'S NEEDS ANALYSIS (LNA)

The notion of learners' needs is one of the essential principles which is implemented and validated in ESP. Robinson (1991: 3), for instance ,explains that "*an ESP course is based on a needs analysis, which aims to specify it is that students have to do through the medium of English.*" Thus, it is also essential to define what the term "need" means. Most specialists agree that

this word can convey different meanings, and it is understood in different ways with regard to the fact that many participants are involved in formulating the ESP courses such as: the institution which organizes the language courses, the language teacher, the learner, and in some cases the sponsor, the needs' analyst and the linguistic expert even when they are outsiders. According to Chambers (1980: 26), the term "need" is also perceived as desires; it can cover a wide range of necessities, wants and lacks of something. Chamber states that: "*The value of needs analysis may go unrealized unless ambiguity and lack of precision in the use of the term are cleared away. It is necessary first to remove superfluous terminology, and second to establish different levels of needs, allotting some kind of priority between them.*" It is indicated that there is a wide variety of definitions provided by the dictionary, conveying both ambiguity and inaccuracy. Then, in terms of analysis especially analysis related to needs, in EFL, it is not an easy task to determine the levels of needs. For example, Robinson (1991: 8) quotes Brindley's (1989) statement in which he defines and distinguishes the objective and subjective needs of the learner.

The first of these terms refers to needs which are derivable from different kinds of factual information about learners, their use of language in real life communication situations as well as their current language proficiency and language difficulties. The second term refers to the cognitive and affective needs of the learner in the learning situation derivable from information about effective and cognitive factors such as personality, confidence, attitudes, learner's wants and expectations with regard to the learning of English and their individual cognitive style and learning strategies. Furthermore, Robinson provides her own definition of needs by distinguishing different categories of needs; the 'objective' versus the 'subjective' needs, the needs 'perceived' by the 'teachers/authorities' versus or opposed to the needs 'felt' by the 'students/learners', 'target needs' opposed to "learning needs".

Hutchinson and Waters (1987: 58) also identified three levels of needs demarcated as 'necessities', 'lacks' and "wants" which are "objective" or "subjective". Needs Analysis (also known as needs assessment) plays a central role in course designing and teaching methodology. It is imperative to take into account of needs analysis irrespective of the nature of the syllabus to be designed whether in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses or for general English (GE) courses. The notion of needs analysis (NA) appeared in 1920 in India by Michael West when he introduced the idea of "needs", in consideration of the learners' needs that are requisite to master the foreign language in the target situation. Also it helps in forming the necessary basic characteristics of designing a course. In this regards Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p.53) argue that "*any language course should be based on needs analysis*". Dudley-Evans &

3. LEARNER'S CENTER APPROACH

It is obvious from what is mentioned in the definitions above, that ESP is a new learner-centered approach. This notion requires further specification, at least in its general sense. A learner-centered approach to learning and teaching sees learning as the active construction of meaning, and teaching as the act of guiding, scaffolding and facilitating learning. This approach considers knowledge as being an ever-changing process, which is built upon the learners prior experience (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987: 59). A learner-centered approach provides opportunities for students to practice critical and creative thinking, problem solving, and decision making. This involves recall, application, analysis, synthesis, prediction and evaluation; all of which contribute to the development and enhancement of conceptual understandings. A learner-centered approach also encourages students to demonstrate ownership of

their ideas and to reflect on and monitor their thinking as they make decisions and take action.

4. COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH

During the 1970s, communicative views of language teaching began to be incorporated into syllabus design. The central question for proponents of this new view was, 'What does the learner need to do with the target language?' rather than, 'What are the linguistic elements which the learner needs to master?' Syllabuses began to appear in which content was specified, not only in terms of the grammatical elements which the learners were expected to master, but also in terms of the functional skills they would need to master in order to communicate successfully. This movement led in part to the development of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Here, syllabus designers focused, not only on language functions, but also on experiential content (that is, the subject matter through which the language is taught). Traditionally, linguistically-oriented syllabuses, along with many called communicative syllabuses, shared one thing in common: they tended to focus on the things that learners should know or be able to do as a result of instruction.

5. CONCLUSION

As a conclusion to the above review, almost all the definitions mentioned by the great researchers and experts are focusing on the same point of view that the researcher has that ESP is a process of learning a language for special needs or purposes referring to the subjects in the learner's field of specialization. The growing use of English as the means of communication in and outside ESL / EFL classrooms is possible to have great impact on the kinds of ESP courses provided and the type of research needed to fortify those ESP courses that should be

designed on the bases of essential language approaches. Regarding the recognizable relation between the conception of ESP and learner's need analysis, learner's center approach and communicative approach the priority in the process of ESP syllabus design should be provided to those approaches.

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