

The Challenges and Opportunities for English Teachers in Teaching ESP in China

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Abstract—In recent years, English for Specific Purposes has been widely adopted in College English courses, which presents a great challenge for all English teachers. With particular characteristics, ESP calls for the interdisciplinary knowledge to meet the needs of learners. Accordingly, teachers' role changes dramatically from the traditional language lecturer to multiple roles especially as a cooperater with content teachers. Cooperation with content teachers is a complex process which involves what and how to cooperate. By analyzing the previous researches and different specialisms of English teachers and content teachers, English teachers will not strive to learn as much content knowledge as possible but find their own and unique status in teaching with their linguistic knowledge. In this way a successful teaching of ESP can be achieved. Along with the challenges, ESP also provides a platform to conduct the communicative approach in class. With the equal status and the common ground built in ESP class, communicative teaching will be more effective.

Index Terms—English for Specific Purposes, cooperation, teacher training, status, communicative teaching

I. INTRODUCTION

The study of language for specific purposes has a long and interesting history, reaching back to classical times (Hutchinson, 1987). Since the 1960s, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has become a significant field within Teaching of English as a Foreign or Second Language (Howatt, 1984), and particularly in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Kennedy, 2012). Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p. 9) list three fundamental reasons for adopting an ESP approach: the expansion of demand for English to suit particular needs; and developments in the fields of both linguistics and educational psychology.

II. THE DEFINITION OF ESP

ESP refers to the teaching and learning of English as a second or foreign language where the goal of the learners is to use English in a particular domain (Paltridge and Starfield, 2013). Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p. 19) see ESP as a broad approach rather than a product, by which they mean that ESP does not involve a particular kind of language, teaching material or methodology. ESP has traditionally been divided into two main areas: English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998, p.5). Strevens' (1988) definition highlights the characteristics of ESP; they are:

- i. designed to meet specified needs of different learners;
- ii. related in content to particular disciplines, occupations and activities;
- iii. centred on language appropriateness;
- iv. Useful in the analysis of discourse.

Robinson (1991) adds that ESP is 'normally goal-directed and ESP courses aims to specify as closely as possible what exactly it is that students have to do through the medium of English.' Tony (1998) further adds that ESP is adapted to the characteristics of the student, as it is typically designed for adult learners.

ESP has been conceptualized by its leading scholars, like Hutchinson and Waters (1987) or Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998), as a multi-stage process, where the ESP practitioner fulfils a variety of roles, including learner needs researcher, course designer, language instructor, learning assessor, and course evaluator. The performance of these roles requires considerable knowledge of a linguistic, socio-cultural and pedagogical nature, necessary to inform the teacher's cognitive processes. Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) summarised five key roles of ESP practitioner: teacher, course designer and materials provider, collaborator, researcher and evaluator. According to Kennedy and Bolitho (1991), there are additional requirements of ESP, compared with the general English teachers. For example, they need to be able: to carry out and interpret a needs analysis for a group of students; to design a syllabus for their classes; to select and adapt teaching materials for their classes, to device appropriate activities; to prepare course outlines; to develop a working knowledge of their students' subject.

III. ESP IN CHINA

In recent years, ESP has become the core of the reform in English teaching in China. Undergraduates are required to study ESP after the study of College English. The focus on ESP has been motivated by a number of factors. The first is that globalization has given rise to the use of English as a global language (Kennedy, 2012). International businesses increasingly require a bi-or multi-lingual workforce, with English as one of the working languages. The demands of vocational training for employment have necessitated ESP teaching in universities world-wide, including programmes across English-medium institutions. Two noteworthy examples are the linked UK-China programmes between Nottingham University and Ningbo University, and between Liverpool University and Xi'an Jiaotong University, which offer students the opportunity to study in both the countries by dividing the study periods. The students need to increase their English language competence to access their content subjects. In the *Guideline for Reform and Development of National Education in the Middle to Long Term*, it is proposed that the objective of internationalism, as part of the push to social and economic reform, can be attained by cultivating batches of intellects with world vision, a command of international regulations, and the ability to be involved in international affairs and competitions. Jigang Cai (2014a) proposes that, with the increasing English competence of students and greater exposure to English in daily life, it is the right time in China to shift from general English to ESP pedagogy.

The second reason for the increased emphasis on ESP is that it is recognized as a learner-centred approach to language instruction. It is distinguished from other approaches by 'a commitment to the goal of providing language instruction that addresses students' own specific purposes' (Belcher, 2009:2). For a long time English teaching in China has been criticized for producing low output with high input. It is generally accepted that successful learning is crucially dependent on motivation (Ellis, 1997). Chinese students complain that, despite assurances of the usefulness of English, after studying English and passing examinations for at least ten years, they have gained little from College English classes (Fan, 2013). This greatly reduces their motivation. By contrast, involvement with academic subjects in ESP prioritizes learners' needs and makes them aware of the practical value of English, thus increasing their motivation. Strevens (1988) summarizes the advantages of ESP: being focused on the learner's needs, it wastes no time; is relevant to the learner; is successful in imparting learning; and thus is more cost-effective than 'general English'.

The third reason is provided by the requirement, set by the Chinese Education Department in 2007, for communicative language teaching (CLT). The aim is to raise learners' English level significantly, especially in listening and speaking, in the context of study, work and social interaction (Cai, 2014 b). Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p 7) characterize the focus on communication as a revolution from the traditional linguistic approach. ESP, which draws its content from particular disciplines, occupations and activities (Strevens, 1988), is one way to achieve this aim, as it emphasises the connections between different subject areas, so that the study of language is linked to other subjects in the curriculum. In making these links, learners develop a stronger grasp of subject matter, a stronger motivation for learning, and a greater ability to analyse situations in a holistic manner (Brinton, Snow & Wesche, 1989).

Notwithstanding the theoretical strengths of ESP compared with the traditional general English, English teachers, the vital practitioners in the process, are confronted by a considerable challenge: to develop advanced levels of subject-specific expertise. In a picturesque phrase, Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p159) describe ESP teachers as all too often reluctant 'dwellers in a strange and uncharted land'. However, as is explored below, opportunities are always embedded in challenges.

IV. THE CHANGING ROLE OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

Traditional language teaching typically emphasises developing knowledge *about* the language, as a means of improving learners' listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. The roles of the teacher are guide, organizer, problem solver, and, particularly in China, the ultimate authority of knowledge. English teachers have been trained to fulfil these roles by a Master's degree in linguistics or literature. A change to ESP, which is linked to a particular profession or discipline, imposes a new demand, as it requires the teacher to have at least a working knowledge of other subjects (Cai, 2014 a).

In contrast to the traditional class, in the ESP class the teacher is no longer the authority on subject knowledge. He or she is more like a language consultant, accepting equal (or even lesser) status with learners who have their own expertise in the subject matter (John, 1998). Therefore, in a cultural context in which the teacher is regarded as a knowledge provider, learners may doubt the teacher's competence. Furthermore, having to use new and often unfamiliar materials, the teacher may feel in control of neither language nor content is under control and wonder, "Where's the English?" (Barron, 2003, P 189). Robinson (1991) enumerates the problems confronting ESP teachers, in order of importance: the low priority given to ESP in timetabling; a lack of personal and professional contact with subject teachers; lower status and grading than subject teachers; isolation from other teachers of English doing similar work; lack of respect from students.

ESP teachers are expected to make use of a new approach, centring on language communication, that differs from that used in EGP. Students and teachers have to learn to make contribution to the constructive learning environment which is beneficial to different students' professional and personal situations by working in partnership. The teacher is a partner and the student plays the role not only as a learner but also a provider of information and knowledge because of

his expertise in subject. (Para, 2015).

It is much easier to observe a rise in the level of students' motivation to learn with the match between language and subject content (Kennedy, 1991). However, it is very obvious that ESP has raised learner expectations which correspondingly result in the considerable demands on an ESP teacher who has to live up to them ultimately. To a teacher, s/he may have to dedicate to a measure of success in his/her task (Kennedy & Bolitho 1991: 141). Nonetheless, English teachers cannot be expected rapidly to become subject specialists. Johns and Duley-Evans (1980) believe that subject-specific work often best approached through collaboration with subject specialists, in the form of team teaching with, or at least being advised by, a subject specialist teacher.

V. THE CHALLENGE FOR ENGLISH TEACHERS AS COLLABORATORS

Among the new roles the ESP teacher has to adopt, that of collaborator is the most significant and demanding. Sullivan and Girginer (2002) argue that collaboration with subject specialists is essential to effective ESP programmes, along with subject-relevant materials and knowledgeable instructors. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) and (Alibakhshi, Ali, & Padiz, 2011) further point out that meaningful communication in the classroom depends on a common fund of knowledge and interest between teacher and learner.

The importance of an interdisciplinary approach to ESP programmes was first noted by Swales (1988). Dudley-Evans and John (1998) suggest three levels of cooperation for subject-specific work: Cooperation, Collaboration and Team-Teaching. *Cooperation* is lower-level advice and guidance from the subject teacher. Language teachers ask and gather information about the students' subject course. *Collaboration* involves ESP teachers in consulting subject teachers about different aspects of the academic field and working together to design appropriate syllabuses and teaching and learning activities. In *team-teaching*, both English and subject teachers are together in the same ESP classroom and teach the material simultaneously. In a similar vein, Barron (1992) provides a four-point continuum according to the extent of subject teachers' contribution: informant—consultant—collaborator—colleague.

The efficacy of collaborative and team teaching activities in ESP programmes has been explored by many researchers (e.g., Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001; Street & Verhoeven, 2001; Hyland, 2002; Johns & Swales, 2002; Warschauer, 2002). The findings of such studies are that teaching English in many ESP settings is very complex. Neither English teachers nor subject teachers can accomplish the teaching task efficiently separately. Students' academic needs are insufficiently met by the English teacher, and they are unlikely to acquire appropriate language knowledge and skills from the subject teacher (Ghafournia & Sabet, 2014). Research has found that team teaching in ESP classes leads to improved performances by students in writing (Jordan, 1997) and reading comprehension (Mahala & Swilky, 1994).

Such collaboration is not without its difficulties, however. For example, Barron (2003) argues that shared methodologies and shared knowledge will not necessarily lead to better learning outcomes through team teaching. He describes an attempted collaboration between subject teachers and EAP teachers on a course for second-year science students at the University of Hong Kong. He found that differences in methodology, epistemology and ontology led to an inability on the part of learners to reconcile what appear to be incompatible discourses. He recommends a constructivist approach to collaboration at both the disciplinary and intercultural levels because it relies on reciprocity. There has to be a flexible ontological background that is open to negotiation and change. Constructivism means with their emphases on the status of their respective knowledge, controlling context and managing the task, both the subject and language teachers are concerned about reciprocity and participate in arrangement where both parties contribute and influence each other equally.

Further, Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p. 160) conclude that ESP teachers "have to struggle to master language and subject matter beyond the bounds of their previous experience", but it is difficult to say what level of discipline-related knowledge is necessary for ESP teachers. Harding (2007, p.7) sees "understanding [of] the nature of the material of the ESP specialism", rather than a high level of subject knowledge, as essential. Ferguson (1997, p. 85) is one of the few to address this issue in detail. He identifies three key kinds of knowledge:

- i. disciplinary cultures and values (rather than content, which is the domain of the subject specialist): this is a form of knowledge which is essentially sociological or anthropological;
- ii. the epistemological bases of different disciplines: a form of knowledge which is philosophical in nature;
- iii. disciplinary genres and discourses: a form of linguistic knowledge.

Other researchers have investigated the pedagogical basis for collaboration in ESP. For Dudley-Evans and St John (1998, p 44), collaboration involves "the more direct together of the two sides, language and subject, to prepare students for particular tasks or courses". Mulford and Roger (1982) describe it as "characterized by informal trade-offs and by attempts to establish some reciprocity in the absence of rules". Similarly, Gray (1989, p 5) sees as a dynamic process, "through which parties who see different aspects of a problem can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited version of what is possible".

Another problem confronting the ESP teacher is that of status and role. In the eyes of some subject teachers, English language teaching is not a discipline. Barron (2003) cites EAP teachers' comments in which they expressed their concern about losing their disciplinary identity. Benesch (2001) found that EAP teachers frequently find themselves in a subservient relationship; in an equal, collaborative relationship the English teacher and the subject teacher adopt complementary roles. These roles partially overlap, but neither should aim to extend this overlap. In the words of

Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p164), ‘the subject specialist can help the ESP teacher in learning more about the learners’ target situation ... the ESP teacher can make the subject specialist more aware of the language problems learners face’.

This latter contribution may, moreover, assist a subject specialist whose lack of proficiency in English may hinder professional communication. A recent example occurred in an article on PLOS ONE by Cai (Cai, 2016), in which he used the term “creator”, which led to his being criticized for creationism and retraction. In his apology Cai wrote, ‘English is not our native language. Our understanding of the word “creator” was not actually as a native English speaker expected. Now we realize that we had misunderstood the word.’

Through collaboration in team teaching, ESP teachers can develop close ties with subject teachers. As they become more familiar with the particular teaching contexts, English teachers are able to identify the particular linguistic needs of the students (and incidentally those of subject teachers). A close rapport between the two can lead to major improvements in both content and language domains (Jackson, 2004). If ESP and subject teachers provide mutual support and development, the problem of status is less likely to arise.

VI. ESP IN CLT

As stated in Section Two above, CLT is now official policy in China, but the outcomes are far from satisfactory. As we have argued, ESP has great potential to improve English pedagogy because it is predicated on subject-oriented domains, in which the learners’ need—and hence their motivation—to communicate are clear, and the linguistic knowledge and skills necessary to enable them to do so are readily specifiable. There are, however, cultural difficulties to overcome if this approach is to be successfully adopted. ESP relies on collaborative learning, but in the deeply Confucian culture of China learners are oriented to passively receiving from the teacher rather than actively engaged in constructing it for themselves. Confucianism emphasizes dependency and nurture rather than independence; hierarchical rather than equal relationships (Bond and Hwang 1986; Cheng 1987), which are not conducive to learning languages for interactive communication (Sullivan, 2000, p120).

Yet, in relation to the subject matter, the ESP teacher will often know less than the learners, and will assume the role of an interested and equal co-student (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). A general knowledge of and common interest in the subject empowers the students and opens possibilities for them to engage in genuine communication in the class. Thus, although the precise future communication requirements in any given workplace cannot be wholly predicted, students can develop a communicative competence to a level that will enable them to cope with them as they arise:

What is needed are activities whose outcome depends on information exchange and which emphasize collaboration and an equal share of responsibility among classroom participants. (Pica, 1987, p 17)

Some researchers (e.g, Canale and Swain 1980; Faerch, Hasstrup, and Phillipson 1984; Bachman 1990) identify the key components of such competence: linguistic competence, pragmatic competence, discourse competence, strategic competence, and fluency. In the traditional approach to EGP teaching in China, teachers focus on linguistic competence, which is concerned with knowledge of the form and meaning of the target language (Tricia, 2000). The emphasis is on correctness in syntax, morphology, and lexis; as a consequence, learners may acquire a good knowledge about English, but limited ability to use it as a means to the end of communication (Krashen 1982).

Thus, university students typically have a foundation of linguistic competence; ESP teachers can focus on developing the other competencies. For example, the study of authentic conversation should not be confined to constructing the students’ own utterances and the understanding the meanings of their collocutors’ utterances, but more importantly on the ability to enter into meaningful interaction. This includes appropriate turn-taking, topic management, self-disclosure, establishing common ground, and the like.

VII. TRAINING FOR ESP TEACHERS

The teachers’ preparation and qualifications determine the success of ESP. It will require diligence and patience, allied to sound pedagogical research and development, to establish a well-informed and practically effective ESP programme in China. ESP teachers will need to be carefully trained to meet the challenges outlined above.

In China, ESP teacher training is in high demand, owing to a lack of qualified teachers but ESP is frequently absent from pre-service training. This can be a significant obstacle to effective teaching. Although ESP teaching prioritizes the specific needs and goals of learners, somewhat paradoxically such learner-centred language pedagogy is also highly teacher-dependent, since the teacher is integrally involved in every aspect of the learning process: teacher autonomy is greater than in traditional EGP.

We give one example of the insufficiency of the preparation of teachers. It is drawn from personal experience, but is almost certainly typical of many institutions in China. In the college in which one of the authors (Jing & Garner) works, all English teachers are required to teach an ESP course, but are provided with neither support from content teachers nor subject-oriented training, which gives rise to a sense of inadequacy in many of them. By contrast, some of the teachers approach ESP as though it involved no more than a change of textbook. Such people are ill-equipped to play the demanding role of simultaneously participating in and guiding the learning process.

Alongside the imperative to equip teachers with an appropriate pedagogical approach, there is the need to develop at

least a basic level of subject knowledge. This is, in some instances, achieved through both pre-service instruction and, more frequently, in-service self-training. Self-training programmes, however, although based on a detailed needs analysis of ESP learners (Master, 1997), are too often insufficient to prepare teachers to cope with real classroom demands (Boswood & Marriott, 1994).

Training for ESP practitioners in China needs to be more goal-oriented and sophisticated, which will require a more extensive evidence base than is currently the case. Ethnographic research is needed to inform pedagogical practice, with greater focus on actual, rather than theoretical or hypothetical, classroom experiences (Ghafournia & Sabet, 2014). A practical dimension in teacher-training programmes is considerably more effective than training “without the practical base and impetus of an actual course to run” (Northcott, 1997, p.9). Chen (2000) proposes an Action-Research Programme, in which an ESP teacher starts with a set of theoretical assumptions, puts them into practice, and learns to related them to actual contexts through processes of reflection, problem solving and decision-making (Wu & Badger, 2009).

The aim of training teachers of ESP is not to make them subject experts, but to maximize their linguistic knowledge and skills. Teachers must acquire an essential general grasp of the subject with the co-operation and/or collaboration of subject teachers. They further need to supplement their linguistic expertise with socio-cultural understandings and pedagogical competences to fulfil a variety of roles. Only through programmes that incorporate these elements can the ultimate goal of ESP be achieved: the capacity of learners to engage in real communication in English.

VIII. CONCLUSION

ESP is increasingly important to the future development of English language teaching in China. We have attempted both to provide an overview of the challenges confronting the profession, and to examine some of these challenges in more detail. Perhaps the most significant challenge in this context is the change of the teacher’s role from expert authority to a collaborator with subject-specialist colleagues and with learners. Fulfilling this new role requires supplementing linguistic knowledge with familiarity with one or more specific disciplines, including adequate knowledge of subject content; it also necessitates a pedagogy significantly different from that which has long been the norm in China. Mastery of these twin elements is a prerequisite for achieving recognition and status for ESP as a specialist pedagogical undertaking, essential to realizing the aims of the government policy of CLT. The success of ESP is dependent upon a new, evidence-based and practically-oriented approach to the training of English teachers.

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