

TEACHING BUSINESS ENGLISH IN A SPANISH UNIVERSITY

ESP began as a response to a series of events occurring by the middle of this century. It developed from ELT and was a consequence of a growing demand for more specialized contents in the teaching of English as a foreign language. ESP does not so much mean teaching a special or restricted language, but teaching English for a particular or specific purpose. ESP spread with great celerity, and the reasons for its quick emergence were essentially three:

- the spread of English as an International language.
- a change in linguistic theory.
- a new approach to teaching, that focused on the learner's needs, rather than on language.

ESP is quite often defined by indicating how it differs from General English (GE). Widdowson (1983) indicates that ESP has a training function aimed at the development of 'restricted competence', whereas General English is aimed at the development of 'general capacity'. Eventually, Hutchinson and Waters answer to the question: *What is ESP?* in a different way:

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 learning, which is based on learner need. The foundation of all ESP is the simple question: Why does this learner need to learn a foreign language? (...) ESP, then, is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner's reason for learning. (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987: 19)

So far, we have been talking about ESP as a whole. However, its very nature implies a classification that corresponds to the many different areas where the teaching of English may be required. There is no end to the list of possible specific purposes to which English might be useful. However, although there is no limit to how specific you can get, financial and practical constraints have consolidated a limited set of areas; and *market* demand will tell whether new types should be added.

The first distinction that must be established is that between English for Occupational Purposes (EOP), and English for Academic Purposes (EAP). These two differ in as many aspects as the setting, the aim, the reasons for taking the course, the knowledge of the content area, and time availability. We are here concerned with EAP, which is carried out at universities, and is aimed at people who intend to obtain a degree in a particular content area, as Business Administration Studies, Medicine, Computer Science, etc. The objective of these EAP courses can be double: to prepare students for future professional life, and to help them with their studies in the case English be used as the language of instruction, or of bibliographical references.

Although some of our students may be simultaneously working and studying, our aim in a Business English course is to prepare them for possible future events in their professional life, where they may have to use English to conduct Business, or prove a good command of it in order to obtain a good job. In most universities -and particularly in Lleida-, the average learner's knowledge of the content area is very low or inexistent, because they are still at their first year of studies. Ellis and Johnson (1994) suggest that:

Business English differs from other varieties of ESP in that it is often a mix of specific content (relating to a particular job area or industry), and general content (relating to general ability to communicate more effectively, albeit in business situations). (Ellis and Johnson, 1994: 3)

Ellis and Johnson (1994) also point out the evolution in the conception of Business English, from being regarded as a specific set of vocabulary that had to be mastered (as in *British Banking*, by J. Firth, 1971, Cassell), to being identified to a number of communicative skills in a business context (as in the video and course book *English for Business*, BBC / OUP, 1972), and finally to a list of functions and techniques such as negotiating, presenting, meeting people, and so on (as in *Business Objectives*, by Vicki Hollett, 1991, OUP).

According to Ellis and Johnson (1994: 7) what characterizes the language of business is a sense of purpose, the existence of highly ritualized social contacts, and the need for clear and concise communication. But, as it has been made clear above, a very important distinction to be made before planning a course is that between job-experienced learners, and pre-experienced learners. The learners registered for the course *Inglés Empresarial* at any Spanish university are clearly pre-experienced learners, and they will need preparation for their future working life in business.

At the Facultat de Dret i Economia of the Universitat de Lleida, no content classes are conducted in English, and recommended bibliography is mostly written in Spanish. This rules out the need for a highly intensive course devoted to reading skills. On the contrary, the course has to be faced with an open perspective, as its aim is to prepare future professionals for any communicative event they may be involved into in the future, providing as many resources as possible, and paying special attention to specific lexical and discourse forms, but also to general English forms likely to be used in ordinary situations. Both demands -general and specific- must be satisfied under a learning-centred perspective that takes into account learning processes and strategies rather than language by its own sake, with a syllabus organized by themes that are encountered in professional business life, and considering also the particular functions and grammatical forms learners may need most in the future.

1 - WHO ARE THE LEARNERS?

We could start by enumerating the conditions that an ideal learner should meet. Unfortunately, there is no such a thing in real life as *the ideal learner*. That makes it useless for us to

attempt such a description. We will rather present the characteristics of real students registered for the Business English course at the Universitat de Lleida.

First, the number of students in the class is not what could be considered *ideal*, with groups of over one hundred people. Although this is the worst handicap of all, it is made more bearable by the fact that some of the students do not intend to pass all the credits they have registered for in a single year, and that results in a lower amount of people physically attending the classes, since some of them prefer to concentrate on other subjects and postpone this one.

Second, the students's geographical origin is generally restricted to the area around Lleida, and the primary reason of many of them for studying Business Administration is that their parents own a shop or a small business. As a consequence, they may be torn between the idea of continuing the family business or trying to get another job more related to what they have studied, or even to transfer to Economics in order to get better paid jobs. As a matter of fact, they know what their professional future will be.

A questionnaire distributed among students, confirmed that most do not have a clear idea of the possible professional careers their studies will open for them. Additionally, they do not know exactly what benefits they will obtain from learning English. However, they do have an impressionistic idea that the more they know, the easier it will be for them to get a job. This reinforces the principle that the course has to be oriented under a learning-centred approach, with great care in devising attractive and varied activities, since self-motivation may exist but it is not taken for granted. In addition, lack of concrete objectives on the part of the learners rules out the possibility of having a negotiated syllabus, as would be desirable in cases where groups are small and highly motivated, e. g., in an in-service course with qualified staff.

The questionnaire revealed a very positive element, though. When learners were asked to assess the importance of English in the world, in Europe, and in Spain, they acknowledged its absolute dominance in the first two contexts (4.97 out of a maximum of 5), and they also assigned an important role to English -and the need to be able to speak it- within the boundaries of Spain (3.125 in front of the 2.182 of French). This is important because it saves the teacher from being asked the question: *Why do we have to study English?* Learners acknowledge its usefulness, something which might not have happened some years ago.

Still, another factor we must keep in mind is learners' expectations regarding how the learning process will take place. Many students assume that their role as university students is to sit down and take notes during the whole hour of class. This may be true for many other subjects where teachers pour lots of knowledge into the ears of the learners, who are willing to write down any single word produced by the professor. ESP classes are obviously different, and learners are expected to take an active part in the learning process. At first, they may feel uncomfortable sharing activities and responsibilities with other classmates, and they may also feel embarrassed to show how much or how little English they know. In order to help them become responsible learners, a period of 'learning how to learn' is vital, during which students get used to do group work, or talk in front of the whole class, etc.

2 - ENGLISH AT THE ESCUELA DE ESTUDIOS EMPRESARIALES DE LLEIDA

At the “Escuela de Estudios Empresariales”, first-year students have a compulsory subject of 9 credits called *Idioma*. Although this may either be Business English or Business French, the great majority of students take the former for two main reasons: it is the foreign language they have studied in High School; and they feel it will be more useful than French. This causes two problems that have already been mentioned above: great differences among students, and massification in the classrooms. The latter is not even solved by the existence of two groups of First Year classes. That is, about half of the 300 students registered for the first year attend classes in the morning, and the other half do it in the evening.

Unfortunately, there is no other subject in the Plan de Estudios that uses English as the language of instruction, or even as the language of readings. Only a few teachers add some books in English in their lists of complementary bibliography, and experience indicates that students do not make the extra effort to read them.

However, there are a number of reasons why the English teacher should keep in touch with what is going on in the other subjects. English must not appear to the students as a disconnected subject, something completely apart from what they are really interested in. The average ESP student is usually more highly motivated than other general-purpose EFL learners. This motivation should not be dampened by making the student think twice about the real importance of English in Business Administration Studies.

3 - THE ROLE OF THE ESP TEACHER

It is important to clarify in what ways the ESP teacher's role differs from the General English one. Although we cannot dissociate ESP from language teaching in general, there are important practical ways in which the work of the General English teacher and the ESP teacher differ. First, it is likely that in addition to the normal functions of a classroom teacher, the ESP teacher will have to deal with needs analysis, syllabus design, materials writing or adaptation, and evaluation. Second, another way in which ESP teaching differs from General English is that most ESP teachers have not been trained as such. They need, therefore, to orientate themselves to a new environment for which they have generally been ill-prepared. Hutchinson & Waters (1987) identify three problems that ESP teachers have to face:

- 1 the lack of an orthodoxy to provide a ready-made guide to ESP teaching.
- 2 the new realms -or areas- of knowledge the ESP teacher has to cope with.
- 3- the change in the status of English Language Teaching.

3. 1. *The lack of orthodoxy*

Since the origins of ESP, there have been many tendencies and different interpretations of how ESP should be taught. This diversity is exemplified in the discussion about the need to use authentic or apparently realistic texts in the ESP class.

Teachers have to orientate themselves to difficult problems with little or no guidance. To help support them, it is important that they form groups with other ESP teachers, exchange information with colleagues within and outside the country, and keep up with new materials and surveys of present state of ESP. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) express very clearly this idea:

In short, ESP teachers cannot turn to linguistics and psychology in the hope of finding ready-made, straightforward answers to the problems that they will meet. Rather, they need to distil and synthesize, from the range of options available, those which best suit the particular circumstances. To do so requires an open mind, curiosity, and a degree of scepticism. ESP teachers need to arm themselves with a sound knowledge of both theoretical and practical developments in ELT in order to be able to make the range of decisions they are called upon to make. All ESP teachers are in effect pioneers who are helping to shape the world of ESP. (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987: 160)

3. 2. *New areas of knowledge*

As well as having to cope with the uncertain values of the strange land of ESP, ESP teachers may also have to struggle to master language and subject matter beyond the bounds of their previous experience. Teachers who have been trained for General English teaching or for the teaching of Literature may suddenly find themselves having to teach with texts whose content they know little or nothing about. (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987: 160)

The essential question is *whether the ESP teacher needs to understand the subject matter of ESP materials*. This question should, in principle, be answered affirmatively, but it must be realized that the linguistic knowledge needed to comprehend the specialist text is little different from that required to comprehend the general text. Thus, specialization of materials must be decided according to the teacher's current state of knowledge, which he should try to enhance little by little through cooperation with learners, peers, and specially by having a positive attitude towards the content area, even if it is felt to be much far away from the education received. The teacher's attitude and interest on the subject matter seems to be important in the development of his / her knowledge.

Gibson Ferguson (1994) stresses the importance of not letting the lack of a complete knowledge of the subject undermine the teacher's confidence. He suggests teachers should present themselves as language experts, not as subject experts. Their function in the classroom is to set up the task, monitor the students' language and performance, and give suitable feedback. Lecturing is relatively less important in ESP, and the teacher should tailor the level of specialisation of classroom materials to what he or she feels confident in handling. ESP teaching should be seen as an opportunity to learn more about teaching, and about the new subject.

3. 3. *Change in the status of English*

One of the most important features of ESP in relation to General English is that the status of English changes from being a subject in its own right to a service industry for other specialities. In many cases this leads to a lowering of status for the teacher, or at least this seems to be the ESP teachers' view. (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987: 164)

In the case of the University of Lleida - and most probably any other university-, there is no actual lowering of the status of the ESP teacher. The main problem lies in the lack of contact of the ESP teacher -assigned to the department of Philology- with subject teachers -assigned to other departments: Business Administration, Mathematics, Law, and so on-. The consequence of the lack of contact with other teachers is the difficulty to integrate the English class with content classes. Moreover, students perceive this isolation and they sometimes feel the ESP class is unrelated to their professional education.

4 - THE LANGUAGE OF ESP

Three levels of language will be considered: vocabulary, grammar and discourse.

4. 1. *Vocabulary*

The language of ESP is most clearly different from 'everyday language' in terms of its word inventory. The vocabulary of particular specialities contains thousands of words that can be found nowhere outside those fields.

Some writers distinguish between: general words -common in everyday language-, semi-technical words -general words with a more technical meaning-, and technical words -specific to a particular field-. According to Ferguson (1994), technical words and terminology have the following properties:

- they are exact and have a single, invariable meaning.
- they are unambiguous.
- they are unique.
- they are neutral in connotation.
- they often enter into an ordered system of terms with a structured hierarchy.
- they are often based on Greek or Latin elements.

In spite of the high frequency of technical words in ESP texts, the dominant view in the literature is that it is not really the ESP teacher's job to teach technical vocabulary. This viewpoint is supported by the fact that technical words tend to be common in different languages, and they are often learnt in the process of learning the subject matter, even if content classes *do not* take place in English.

4. 2. *Grammar*

There are indeed differences between ESP and General English in the frequency of use of certain grammatical forms. What is not clear is that those grammatical forms are distinctive and specific of ESP. The basic facts can be summarized as follows:

- ESP texts have a higher frequency of the passive voice compared to General English.
- the progressive aspect is very infrequent in scientific texts, and the past tense tends to outnumber other verb forms.
- in scientific and technical texts, finite clauses tend to be replaced by complex noun phrase structures.

4. 3. *Discourse*

It could be argued that ESP clearly differs from General English in its discourse. The problem is that there is no such thing as *an* ESP discourse. In general, we could say that, relative to General, ESP discourse tends toward the formal, the objective, and toward independence from immediate context. Nevertheless, any branch of ESP has its own particular discourse.

From what has been said above, there is an important conclusion to be drawn: ESP teaching must be faced with the same attitude as GE, giving priority to students' enjoyment in the class. Not in vain, given a certain Business situation, it is evident that a good GE learner will be able to perform better than a bad Business English learner.

5 - MATERIALS AND ACTIVITIES

There are no absolute good or bad materials; there are only degrees of fitness for the required purpose. A possible way to face the materials selection is for ESP teachers to write their own materials. But this is rather time consuming, and careful study and evaluation of commercially available materials can be very helpful.

The process of evaluating materials is simply one of matching needs to available solutions. However, materials should meet certain requirements:

- provide a stimulus to learning: with interesting texts, enjoyable activities, opportunities for learners to use their existing knowledge, and content which both learner and teacher can cope with.
- provide a clear and coherent unit structure in order to maximise the chances of learning.
- embody a coherent view of the nature of language and learning.
- introduce teachers to new techniques.
- provide models of correct appropriate language use.

With regard to activities, they will not have to be of a certain specific type in ESP classes. The only constrain we will have to consider is that of the number of students, which in the case of

Lleida is about one hundred per class. Therefore, activities will have to adapt to this particular circumstance. For instance, eliciting answers and contributions from volunteering students will be nearly impossible, and the relation between teacher and students will have to be controlled and managed by the teacher, since spontaneous speech will be difficult. The only way to have students participating will be by asking them directly. This will obviously cause some uneasiness to some of them, but it can be overcome by making it clear that they still keep the freedom not to answer. This freedom will protect students with difficulties from feeling humiliated in front of their classmates.

Finally, another aspect that should be developed is *awareness*: language awareness, and cultural awareness. Language awareness because it can help students a lot in understanding the processes of language and its social role. Cultural awareness because they may need it in future international relations, and also because it is highly motivating. Students like learning about different cultures and life styles, and this knowledge constitutes a motivational factor in language learning, especially when we are dealing with cultures so appealing to young people as the British, the American, or even the Australian, are.

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