

ESP Teaching Troubles, or when Need is the Mother of Invention

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Teaching English for either scientific or occupational purposes has become a new trend that is worth more researches to be done, more theories to be tested, and more experiments to be conducted. It is evident that the learnt English should suit the aim of the learner. Teaching General English without discrimination to all learners who have different aims of learning English and various majors proved to be wrong. That is why ESP teachers should initiate a promising program that will make a revolution in English teaching both in techniques and materials. In this paper, I'll develop these ideas by giving a detailed account of my own personal and professional experience at Mansoura University.

As an English teacher, have you ever felt that you are a big failure? Have you ever gone through an experience which was full of senses of despair, frustration and confusion? Has it ever come to your mind that you can do anything in the world, except teaching? If your answer is "Yes", be sure you will be a good teacher, I mean an ESP teacher!

Before I embark on telling you about my experience, I think it is wise to let you know something about the nature of my job. I am an English language instructor who leads two related careers. On the one hand, I am working on my M.A., which is on Literature; and, on the other hand, I'm teaching some classes to "non-specialist students", as we call them in Egypt. Non-specialists are the students whose majors are not English, but may be History, Mathematics, Science or Physics. Besides, sometimes I teach courses to people who lead different careers like doctors, bankers, engineers and businessmen who think that learning English will help them have better chances or even work abroad.

Let's move now to the tragic part of my story. I have not received any regular education or courses on ESP, but I know how to teach General English. To make it more tragic, I will tell you about the way I used to teach my English courses. I hope you will not like it. I used to group all the learners who seemed to have the same level of English proficiency together – which can be

indicated through an English proficiency exam –, regardless of their majors, professions, careers, aims of learning English and expectations. I always thought, "Okay, they want to learn how to read and communicate in English. Why bother with their specializations?" Despite my students' various aims of learning English – for instance, doctors need to know how to use English in medical situations, and the same goes for all professions – I taught them the same content. I used to extract some literary passages full of vocabulary, then I asked them to read the passages, guess the meanings of the difficult words, answer general questions on the given text, and then write a short paragraph on the taught topic. The same was done every class, I only added more passages, introduced more vocabulary and explained some grammatical rules. Thus, the situation was exactly like this: I did not pay much attention to the differences among the learners or to their specializations. My sole aim was to increase their English vocabulary – which in most cases was not related to their majors –, and to introduce some grammar.

Unfortunately, on finishing the courses and asking my students to tell me how much they benefited from the English course, the only response I got – you may call it a complain – was: "Okay, it is a nice course, but we do not know how this general English will help us in our professions. We are doctors and you've been teaching us passages about satellites, deserts and means of communication." This was a bright doctor's comment on the course. Another banker said, "I'm going to work in an American bank and I don't know how this English helps me to do transactions with foreign clients, as the vocabulary we learnt in the course is different from the real commercial terminology we use in a bank." Anyhow, I got the same complaint from most of my learners.

It is a fact that I taught them English, but it did not help them much in their specializations. Yes, they could communicate in English, but this was restricted to life situations, not technical ones. To me, it seemed that I was teaching them a language that had already died, like Latin. It was of no use to them.

This awful experience gave me the impression that I am one of those old-fashioned teachers who never care about their learners' needs. They always

teach regardless of what the learners learn. To them, teaching is a job that should be done one way or the other. This big failure motivated me to reconsider my "teaching", to re-evaluate my aims, to try to know what was wrong with me, and to pay more attention to my learners' needs and goals of learning English.

Besides, this helped me to view the teacher's job differently. It's not only to teach a course and then say good-bye to his/her students. A good teacher should assess students' needs and goals, evaluate their progress and develop techniques and materials to suit the learners.

By that time – which was three years ago – I had not reached any conclusions that would help me find an answer to this problem. I did not know what and how I should teach students with different majors. It was really something confusing to me.

Surprisingly, I found that there were other specialists who were interested in teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP). The Fulbright Commission in Egypt established the idea of ESP by setting up four big ESP Centres all over Egypt. Their aim is both to teach English and do research on non-specialist students. Of course these centres teach English for occupational, scientific and specific purposes. Thus, I knew I was not living alone in this world: there are other people who share with me the same ideas and thoughts. I realized that the idea of ESP was not a wild imagination but a fact that existed. This helped me to concentrate all my efforts on developing a course to those non-specialist learners.

I do not consider designing a course for occupational, scientific or specific purposes to be a difficult task. My previous "awful" experience has shown me the three basic pillars on which we can establish a successful ESP course. These three pillars are the following:

1. Learners
2. Materials
3. Teaching techniques

1. *Learners*

An ESP teacher should meet with his students before starting his course. He should give students the chance to express what they expect from this course, what their aims are, in what situations they will be using English, how this will help them promote in their careers, what type of English will improve their occupational or scientific communications. Briefly, the teacher should assess his learners' needs and goals, and this will help the teacher to achieve his aim effectively. For instance, the aim of a computer engineer learning English may be to present a paper and understand what is going on while attending an international computer conference. Realizing the different needs and goals of learners, the teacher should classify them. Then the teacher should meet privately each homogeneous group and ask them again to write down the very specific objectives they expect from this course. A banker, for example, may say, "I need to learn how to give instructions in English about depositing money, how to explain the how of issuing an insurance policy, and how to provide information about currency exchange." The teacher should consider all these objectives while planning an ESP course.

2. *Materials*

The second step is to choose the kind of material that will enhance the learners' aims. The choice of materials should be a cooperative process conducted by both the teacher and the learner. In order to collect the suitable and authentic materials that represent the learner's specialization, both the teacher and the learner should check specialized dictionaries having the needed terminology, examine and consult specialized books written on the topics to be dealt with in the course. The role of the teacher is not to teach these scientific theories nor explain the technical terms, but it is to show students how these technical terms are linked together, grouped in situations and used by means of the English language. For example, for a student of Physics learning English, the teacher should introduce some technical terms, and the student, by using his own theoretical information on the issue, will build situations.

Moreover, the taught materials should be graded from simple situations, less terminology and much General English, to more complicated technical

situations, more terminology and less General English. Simply, the duty of the teacher is to present the terminology used, create the situations and introduce some General English that will help students build ideas. Thus, it's the learner's duty to expand the circle of his "English Communications" after learning the basic terminology.

3. Teaching techniques

The teaching technique should be modified according to the aim of the English-learning student. The aim of a learner may be to read, speak, discuss ideas in his field using English, or maybe to practise some fixed situations related to his specialization. An example that represents the first case is a doctor who is interested in learning medical English that will help him read and speak using medical terms. Such a doctor needs a teaching technique that will introduce him to a lot of medical passages, give him the chance to say what he understands and explains the ideas. On the contrary, a banker, whose aim is to learn the English needed for instructing clients how to deposit or draw money, should be taught through a technique that will give him the chance to "repeat" some fixed utterances and technical terms used in this situation (depositing or drawing money).

Obviously, I don't claim that the strategy I have presented for planning an ESP course is perfect. Certainly, it needs lots of improvements and refinements. I only want to show how my failure in teaching non-specialist students the English that would satisfy their needs pushed me to think of an alternative plan. This failure has opened my eyes to the wide scopes of the English language used for occupational purposes, made me aware of the needs of my learners, and helped me to consider the idea of ESP.

I hope you will become a professional ESP teacher, without going through my awful experience.