

**APPROACHES TO EST LEARNER NEEDS: THE ROLE OF THE ESP PRACTITIONER****R. NAGA DHANA LAKSHMI**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper discusses the role of the ESP Practitioner in catering to the needs of the English language learners, especially, the engineering students in India, in English as a Second Language (ESL) environment. This study is based on the reviews of literature which indicate that learner needs will have to be addressed if the course is to be successful. The reviews suggest important principles for investigating learner needs, specifying that attempts should be made to meet those needs in actual teaching and learning situations, which further involve attention to curriculum development. Then, under the headings of teacher, collaborator, course designer and materials provider, researcher, and evaluator proposed by Dudley-Evans, a comparison is made between the 'General English' teacher and the so-called ESP practitioner.

**INTRODUCTION**

Researches in the field of engineering, especially, with regard to English language, show that English is of paramount importance in the academic and professional lives of engineering students (Basturkman, 1998; Pendergrass et al., 2001; Pritchard & Nasr, 2004; Joesba & Ardeo, 2005; Sidek et al., 2006; Hui, 2007; Venkatraman & Prema, 2007). For example, Pendergrass et al. (2001) pointed out that English is an essential tool in engineering education, and therefore "integrating English into engineering, science and math courses is an effective way to improve the performance of engineering students in oral and written communication"(p1). In addition, Pritchard & Nasr (2004, p. 426) emphasised that "English is of particular importance for engineering and science

students because it is the principal international language of science and is looked upon as an effective means for enabling those students to become familiar with professional texts written in English". Similarly, Joesba & Ardeo (2005) stated that as English has become the de facto international language of science and technology, engineering students have to face this fact while they are students, since books, papers, handbooks, journals, etc. written in English are included in their reading lists, and after graduation, because one of their most valuable resources will be English at the labour market.

The views of this researcher were based on preliminary interviews with some English language teachers at Jawaharlal Nehru Technological University, Kakinada (JNTUK) and some engineering graduates,

who graduated from the JNTUK. They thought that the engineering students would complete their studies without any benefits from the English language course they had taken at the JNTUK. According to them, the engineering graduates still face a lot of difficulties in using the language. As a result of their poor performance in English, most of the engineering graduates have been rejected at the interviews when applied for work with multinational companies. Many reasons can be attributed to the students' low proficiency in English. One of them is the English language curriculum offered to the Engineering students.

**Needs Analysis:** Needs analysis refers to the determination of the language needs of the learners and the prioritization of these needs. In engineering education, specific English language skills are needed to enable the success in academic settings and hence it is imperative to carry out a Needs Analysis to determine the student needs. From among the many components of needs analysis TSA (Target Situation Analysis) and PSA (Present Situation Analysis) are felt to be the fundamental components for assessing the language needs of learners.

**Target Situation Analysis (TSA)** :Dubbed by Chambers (1980) the term, 'Target Situation Analysis' is a form of needs analysis, which focuses on identifying the learners' language requirements in the occupational or academic situation they are being prepared for. It comprises a set of parameters within which information on the students' target situation can be plotted as well as tasks and activities that enable the usage of English for targeted situation could be designed.

**Present Situation Analysis (PSA)** : As stated by Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998, p. 124), PSA estimates strengths and weaknesses in language, skills and learning experiences. The three basic sources of information for PSA are the students, the language-teaching establishment, and the 'user-institution'. To carry on these on the track, it is a good way for the trainers to discuss with previous course teachers and to identify problems in the past courses. Secondly, a placement English assessment could be scheduled to get information of learners' present situation analysis.

The language assessment includes listening, speaking and reading sections. This assessment will provide the trainers with the participants' present language ability, and also diagnose their major language needs. Finally, questionnaires will be handed out to collect participants' motivations and interests in learning and their previous learning experiences.

Besides, since the group size is not big, the information will be collected through in-depth exploration and through face-to-face interviews with the participants. Only in this way, learners' subjective needs, especially their needs of the outcomes of the course could be found out. This type of interviews is scheduled to be conducted at both the beginning and middle of the course.

The purpose of needs analysis is to identify learner needs, taking place at a relatively theoretical level outside of classes, yielding recommendations on how a course should be designed. Yet, at a more profound level, needs analysis is actually a process in curriculum development (Brown, 1995; Richards, 2001); it can and should be extended to curriculum development because many other important variables are connected with learner needs in authentic teaching and learning. A description of needs conducted prior to classes, by itself, will not generate a complete understanding of learner needs. Allwright (1988) states "what happens in the classroom still must matter. We need studies of what actually happens [inside classes]." (p. 51). In fact, Holliday (1994) points out that data about what really happens in the classroom are not only insufficient, but also lacking for the settings around the world. So the Learner needs should be analysed on an ongoing basis, depending on contextual and human affective variables.

**The ESP Practitioner:** In fact, one may ask 'What is the difference between the ESP and 'General English' approach?' Hutchinson et al. (1987:53) answer this quite simply, "in theory nothing, in practise a great deal". In 1987, of course, the last statement was true. At the time, teachers of 'General English' courses, while acknowledging that students had a specific purpose for studying English, would rarely conduct a needs analysis to find out what was necessary to actually achieve it. Teachers nowadays, however, are

much more aware of the importance of needs analysis, and published textbooks have improved dramatically allowing the teacher to select materials which closely match the goals of the learner. Perhaps this demonstrates the influence that the ESP approach has had on English teaching in general. Nevertheless, the line between where 'General English' courses stop and ESP courses start has become very vague indeed.

Ironically, although many 'General English' teachers can be described as using an ESP approach, basing their syllabi on a learner needs analysis and their own specialist knowledge of using English for real communication, many so-called ESP teachers are using an approach furthest from that described above. Coming from a background unrelated to the discipline in which they are asked to teach, ESP teachers are usually unable to rely on personal experiences when evaluating materials and considering course goals. At the university level in particular, they are also unable to rely on the views of the learners, who tend not to know what English abilities are required by the profession they hope to enter. The result is that many ESP teachers become slaves to the published textbooks available, and worse, when there are no textbooks available for a particular discipline, resolve to teaching from textbooks which may be quite unsuitable.

Dudley Evans describes the true ESP teacher or ESP Practitioner (Swales, 1988) as needing to perform five different roles. These are 1) Teacher, 2) Course Designer and Materials Provider, 3) Researcher 4) Collaborator, and 5) Evaluator.

**The ESP Practitioner as a Teacher:** The first role as 'teacher' is synonymous with that of the 'General English' teacher. It is in the performing of the other four roles that differences between the two emerge. ESP is a practical discipline with the most important objective of helping students to learn. However, the teacher is not the primary knower of the carrier content of the material. The students, especially where the course is specifically oriented towards the subject content or work the students are engaged in, may know more about the content than the teacher. The teacher has the opportunity to draw on students' knowledge of the content in order to generate

communication in the classroom. When the teaching is a specific course on, for example, how to write a business report, it is vital that the teacher adopts the position of the consultant who has the knowledge of communication practices but needs to "negotiate" with the students on how best to explore these practices to meet the objective they have. The relationship is much more of a partnership. In some situations the role of ESP teacher extends to giving one-to-one advice to students (e.g., in non-English speaking countries students will have to publish in international journals and need advice in both language and discourse issues). ESP teachers need to have considerable flexibility, be willing to listen to learners, take interest in the disciplines or professional activities the students are involved in, and also take some risks in their teaching.

**The ESP Practitioner as Course Designer and Material Provider :** Both 'General English' teachers and ESP practitioners are often required to design courses and provide materials. One of the main controversies in the field of ESP is how specific those materials should be. Hutchinson et al. (1987:165) support materials that cover a wide range of fields, arguing that the grammatical structures, functions, discourse structures, skills, and strategies of different disciplines are identical. More recent research, however, has shown this not to be the case. Hansen (1988), for example, describes clear differences between anthropology and sociology texts, and Anthony (1998) shows unique features of writing in the field of engineering. Unfortunately, with the exception of textbooks designed for major fields such as computer science and business studies, most tend to use topics from multiple disciplines, making much of the material redundant and perhaps even confusing the learner as to what is appropriate in the target field. Many ESP practitioners are therefore left with no alternative than to develop original materials. It is here that the ESP practitioner's role as 'researcher' is especially important, with results leading directly to appropriate materials for the classroom.

**The ESP Practitioner as Researcher :** Research has been particularly strong in the area of EAP (genre analysis). Regarding the research into English for

Science & Technology, there is a growing interest in investigating the genres, the language and the skills involved in engineering communication. Then ESP teachers need to be in touch with such research. Teachers carrying out a needs analysis, designing a course, or writing teaching materials need to be capable of incorporating the findings of the research, and those working in specific ESP situations need to be confident that they know what is involved in skills such as written communication.

**The ESP Practitioner as Collaborator:** It is believed that subject-specific work is often best approached through collaboration with subject specialist. This may involve cooperation in which ESP teacher finds out about the subject syllabus in an academic context or the tasks that students have to carry out in a work or business situation. Or it may involve specific collaboration so that there is some integration between specialist studies or activities and the language. It might involve the language teacher specifically preparing learners for the language of subject lectures or business presentations. Another possibility is that a specialist checks and comments on the content of teaching materials that the ESP teacher has prepared. The fullest collaboration is where a subject expert and a language teacher team-teach classes; in EAP such lessons might help with the understanding of subject lectures or the writing of examination answers, essays or theses, while in EOP they might involve the language teacher and a business trainer working together to teach both the skills and the language related to business communication.

**The ESP Practitioner as Evaluator :** The ESP practitioner is often involved in various types of evaluation - testing of students, evaluation of courses and teaching materials. The final role as 'evaluator' is perhaps the role that ESP practitioners have neglected most to date. As Johns et al. (1991) describe, there have been few empirical studies that test the effectiveness of ESP courses. For example, the only evaluation of the non compulsory course reported by Hall et al. (1986:158) is that despite carrying no credits, "students continue to attend despite rival pressures of a heavy programme of credit courses". On

the other hand, recent work such as that of Jenkins et al. (1993) suggests an increasing interest in this area of research. Evaluation of course design and teaching materials should be done while the course is being taught, at the end of the course and after the course has finished, in order to assess whether the learners have been able to make use of what they learned and to find out what they were not prepared for. Evaluation through discussion and ongoing needs analysis can be used to adapt the syllabus.

#### CONCLUSION

In conclusion it can be said that using skills as a framework of ESP, ESP teachers are provided with the necessary knowledge and tools to deal with their own students' specializations. It should be remembered that ESP teachers are not specialists in the field; but in teaching English, their subject is English for the profession but not the profession in English.

It is obvious that the ESP practitioner has many roles to play. To be more successful in his career and to do justice to his roles he should make use of the latest information provided by the experts in the field. Then students will benefit in building up their careers in a successful manner.

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