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Fundamentals of English for Specific Purposes to the Development of Society

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Abstract

English for Specific Purposes is introduced to take care of individual differences of learners - it is learner-centred oriented. This principle underlying this approach to teaching strives to emphasize motivating learners to learn by relating language teaching to field or subject of interest to learners: words and structures reflecting nuances of their pursuing subject specialism. This paper therefore presents the reasons for ESP as well as the fundamentals of ESP to the learner, the teacher, society, on syllabus designing, on material production, and on methodology for realizing ESP teaching goal. Together with these essentials of ESP, the pivotal position of the teacher in accomplishing educational philosophy of society is considered, but the overwhelming problem now is that teaching at all levels is bedevilled by mediocrities. Can ESP expectations be realized in Nigeria?

Introduction

“English for Specific Purposes is about specialized varieties of English, that is, varieties of English in the professions... English has a variety for law, Engineering, Business, Journalism, Science and Technology, Religion etc”, (Ike 7). These fields of study found specific need for their language nuances to be studied and used by Hutchinson and Waters. According to Hutchinson and Waters, “ESP must be founded in the first instance on sound principles of learning, and it is with this purpose in view that we have proposed a learning-centred approach to ESP” (2). Explaining further, they stress that “the central importance of the learners and their attitudes to learning” is fundamental to influencing on “their motivation to learn and therefore on the effectiveness of their learning”.

This lent support to the development of courses in which ‘relevance’ to the learners’ needs and interests was paramount. The standard way of achieving this was to take texts from the learners’ specialist area – texts about Biology for Biology students etc. The assumption underlying this approach was that the clear relevance of the English course to their needs would improve the learners’ motivation and thereby make learning better and faster (8).

The fields or subjects of study mentioned by Ike and counselled to be studied by Hutchinson and Waters will fundamentally produce the result of heightened motivation to learn. “The English needed by a particular group of learners could be identified by analyzing the linguistic characteristics of their specialist area of work or study” Hutchinson and Waters (8).

Why English for Specific Purposes?

English for Specific Purposes does not require teaching identifiable varieties of English in the language system governed by rules of usage – morphemes, words, phrases, clauses and sentences as in general English. ESP of course considers specialized words and grammar for every subject of study, but it is essentially, according to Hutchinson and Waters, “an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner’s reason for learning” (19). The central purpose of ESP is learners’ interest identified in three broad factors by Hutchinson and Waters (6-8) and Umera-Okeke (13-15).

Nigeria belongs to the outer circle of Kachru's three concentric circles of the spread and use of the English language in the world – inner circle, outer circle and expanding circle. To the inner belongs native speakers, the outer has those who use English as a second language, and to the expanding are countries that use it as a foreign language. This spread makes English international, as Hutchinson and Waters report, “there is the expansion of demand for English to suit particular needs” (8). This motivation to demand for English started after the Second World War in 1945. The United States emerged from the war economically and technologically strongest, and to associate with the U.S. her language, English, must be learned, “not for the pleasure or prestige of knowing the language”,

but because English was the key to the international currencies of technology and commerce. ...it created a new generation of learners who knew specifically why they were learning a language – businessmen and women who wanted to sell their products, mechanics who has to read instructional manuals, doctors who needed to keep up with developments in their field and a whole range of students whose course of study included textbooks and journals only available in English. All these and many others needed English and most importantly, they knew why they needed it (6).

Corroborating the continuous expansion of English, Crystal (106) attributes “the present day status of English primarily to the result of two factors: the expansion of British colonial power, which peaked towards the end of the 19th century, and the emergence of the United States as the leading economic power of the 20th century”.

A second reason for learner-centred English is introduced by a revolution in linguistics. Initially, a study of English was based on the study of the rules of the grammar of English. Hutchinson and Waters say that “the new studies shifted attention away from defining the formal features of language usage to discovering the ways in which language is actually used in real communication” (7). In the actual use of language, spoken and written language differs; the language of one subject of study differs from the language of another subject of study. Hutchinson and Waters further explain: “if language varies from one situation of use to another, it should be possible to determine the features of specific situations and then make these features the basis of the learners’ course”. Expatiating this reason, Kristen Gatehouse

(p1 of 11) adds: “if language in different situations varies, then tailoring language instruction to meet the needs of learners in specific contexts is also possible”.

A third reason for the development of ESP is the contribution of educational psychology to laying emphasis on “the central importance of the learners and their attitudes to learning”, Hutchinson and Waters (8). Kristen Gatehouse throws light on Hutchinson and Waters third reason on the origin of ESP. According to her,

Learners were seen to employ different learning strategies, use different skills, enter with different learning schemata, and be motivated by different needs and interests. Therefore, focus on the learners’ needs became equally paramount as the methods employed to disseminate linguistic knowledge. Designing specific courses to better meet these individual needs was a natural extension of this thinking. To this day, the gatehouse in ESP circle is learner-centred or learning-centred (2 of 11).

Okeke (15) affirms thus learner-interest-determined focus and points out that “texts were taken from the learner’s area of specialization and English lessons developed from them. This increases the learners’ motivation and makes learning better and faster”.

Fundamentals of English for Specific Purposes

The meaning of ESP and the reasons for ESP emphasize one fundamental essence – the interest of the learner. A consequence upon which the dictum “Tell me what you need English for and I will tell you the English that you need” became the guiding principle of ESP and this increased specialization in language learning (Hutchinson and Waters 8). Based on this, are the fundamentals considered.

To the Learner

One of the defining “absolute characteristics” of English for Specific Purposes, according to Dudley-Evans (1997) as outlined by Laurence Anthony (Anthony ‘at’ice.ous.ac.jp) and corroborated by Gatehouse (www.khae-service.com), is that “ESP is defined to meet specific needs of the learners”. Hutchinson and Waters (21) emphasizing the centrality of learners in this new teaching state. “ESP is an approach to language teaching which aims to meet the needs of particular learners, much of the work done

by ESP teachers is concerned with designing appropriate courses for various groups of learners”. The underlining expectation of ESP is interest elicitation, interest recognition, readiness of the learner to learn and positive result attainment. ESP therefore offers the opportunity of banding learners according to ability and interest, and designing courses for “specific disciplines” and pacing these courses, according to Dudley-Evans definitions of ESP, with “the language appropriate to these activities (disciplines) in terms of grammar, lexis, register, study skills, discourse and genre”. In so doing, learners specialize in the language of their choice field of study, will be at home in a discussion of their specialties and excel at doing anything about innovation or renovation carried out in their professional areas. Thus, Nigeria will be enriched educationally, economically, technologically and internationally.

To the Teacher

Banding or streaming to attend to learners’ ability or interest to learn is generally overseen by the teacher. The overseeing position of the teacher manifests in their capability of designing a course befitting a particular group of learners. Stressing on the ESP teacher and course design, Hutchinson and Waters (21) point their inseparability:

for the ESP teacher, course design is often a substantial and important part of the workload. Designing a course is fundamentally a matter of asking questions in order to provide a reasoned basis for the subsequent processes of syllabus design, materials writing, classroom teaching and evaluation.

The questions asked by teachers will also enable them to identify what linguistic theories and theories of learning have to offer for ESP course teaching and learning. The ESP teacher’s knowledge of language and learning theories is suggestive of attaining certain height in education. This affirms Robinson’s (1991) qualities of an ESP teacher as outlined by Umera-Okeke (81-82). The ESP teacher “(1) should be fluent in the foreign language; (2) must have undergone training in English language teaching (ELT). This training stands the teacher out to know what to teach (aspects of the language features to adopt), how to teach (model of learning theories to adopt for effective teaching of a particular topic), and why teaching a particular item (needs a particular group of learners are expected to achieve)”. In other words, the teacher knows where the shoes of the learners

are pinching them; and the approach to take to smoothen the pinching or change the shoes entirely.

To the Nigeria Society

English for Specific Purposes points “towards the need for increased specialization in language learning” (Hutchinson and Waters: 8) and professionalism in chosen career. ESP oriented towards inculcating the English morphology and syntax of disciplines into learners strives to make graduates adept in the use of language of their areas of specialties. The knowledge of the language inspired by interest encourages learners to imbibe any idea introduced in the field of study.

This idea consolidates the division of labour that characterizes ministries and parastatals of a country. The idiom “a square peg in a round hole” explains a wrong hand at a right place, or a right hand at a wrong place. Therefore, professionalism imbued with its jargon in ESP oriented programmes and as mastered by an educated person is reflective of ministries: ministry of Agriculture by agriculture experts, information by media experts, technology by technologists, law by lawyers, medicine by medical experts, international affairs by political scientists, etc. These experts will approach their duties effortlessly.

To Syllabus Designing

English for Specific Purposes is learner-centred oriented. What to learn, how to learn it and the end result are specified in a syllabus. “A syllabus is a document which says what will (or at least what should) be learnt”, Hutchinson and Waters (80). As a document of what a teacher should teach and what a learner should learn, an ESP syllabus enunciates and describes legacies ESP obtained from language theories – traditional/classical grammar: the idea of case and register analysis: structural grammar: the use of substitution table and structural syllabus; transformational-generative grammar: performance vs competence leading to communicative-competence; functional grammar: the idea of language functions in reflecting social behaviour of “advising, warning, threatening, describing” (Hutchinson and Waters 31); as well as learning theories – behaviourists stimulus-response-reinforcement by repetition patterns; mentalists’ rule-governing use of language; cognitivists’ idea of learning through sensory perceptions of seeing, tasting, feeling, smelling and hearing; the affective factor whose central idea of motivation diverged as instrumental and integrative. The

eclecticism converged from these languages and learning theories is superimposed on the needs of a particular group of learners. Thus a syllabus fundamentally encapsulates contents of what to be taught and learned. Adherence to this document is adherence to the need of the learner, to the intended job of the teacher, and to the resulting advantage to the Nigerian society.

On Material Production

The learner and the teacher may be available but materials might not be available. ‘Materials’ refers to what a learner should learn and the aids to making learning possible. Hutchinson and Waters (108 – 109) explain materials essential to realizing the needs of particular learners. They identify four aspects of materials to be ready.

Input: According to Hornby (ed) (618), input is “time, knowledge, ideas, etc that you put into work, a project, etc. in order to make it succeed”. This knowledge and ideas are captured in Hutchinson and Waters’ input of a “text, dialogue, video-recording, diagram or any piece of communication data”. This input “provides a number of things: - stimulus material for activities; - new language items; - correct models of language use; a topic for communication; - opportunities for learners to use their existing knowledge both of the language and the subject matter”. The second material is content focus. Language is “a means of conveying information and feelings about something” (Hutchinson and Waters 109). Content therefore is subject matter, or central idea(s) or theme(s) of a book, speech, workshop, conference, programme. This idea is conveyed by language. The third material is language focus. Learners are compelled to use language. “Good materials should involve both opportunities for analysis and synthesis. In language focus learners have the chance to take the language to pieces, study how it works and practice putting it back together again”(Hutchinson and Waters 109). The fourth material is task. Task is a piece of work that somebody has to do: this may be hard or unpleasant. Language learning is language use. Both of these terms are task, but the former leads to or results in the latter. It is therefore necessary to design materials “to lead towards a communicative task in which learners use the contents and language knowledge they have built up through the unit”. Summing up this materials design models, Hutchinson and Waters state: “the language and content are drawn from the input and are selected according to what the learners will need in order to do the task”.

Materials, textbooks in particular, that have as their goals the needs of the learner are fundamental to creating development in a country. This is because the learner has what to learn, the teacher has what to teach and what to aid their teaching, and syllabus has the materials to facilitate transmission of learners' needs contained it. The end products are skilful personalities making a nation virile, self-relied and comparatively advantaged economically, technologically and socio-culturally.

On Right Methodology

Methodologies for teaching abound. Some may be considered superior to the other. However, this is poor judgment as regards teaching speaking, listening, writing and reading skills. A particular method may be satisfactory for a language skill but weak for the other. Because of this deficiency, Vergheze (62) counsels: "No teacher should forget that there is no one method suitable for all occasions and that the teacher cannot decide a priori that a particular method is the only one that he must use. What is important for the teacher is to find out what approach and what method will enable him to realize a particular objective under a set of particular circumstances". Vergheze therefore emphasizes that "effective teaching depends on the teacher and his 'eclectic' ability to adopt and adapt methods and approaches to suit his classroom environment. That is to say, even when his classroom work is mainly based on [a particular approach], he should be prepared to incorporate into his teaching techniques useful concepts from other approaches and methods".

Teaching Methods Adopted over the years

The Grammar Translation Method or the Classical Method: Grammar is a systematic account or description of the structure of a language, and translation is "the process by which a unit that is basically of one syntactic class is transferred to a role that is basically that of another" (Matthew 414). This method projected "the memorization of grammatical rules and translation of related texts, and paid little attention to speaking and reading as skills to be developed. The method presupposes that the process of translation will enable the student to master the syntax, phraseology, idioms etc, of the second language" (Vergheze 57).

The Natural Method: Language is a natural phenomenon. Any geographical areas inhabited by man must have inherent languages for communication. Such languages in such locales form part and parcel of the existence of man

and his culture. So, any learning of a language of a particular geographical locale involves learning the world views and cultural patterns of that speech community, encapsulated in its language. So natural method “was based on the belief that the best one could do to teach a foreign language was to follow nature. That is to say, the maximum exposure of the child to the target language without the least interference from the mother tongue would enable the child to learn the language” (Verghese 56). Further expatiation on Verghese exposure of the child (learner) is given by Richards and Rodgers who counsel that “teachers must encourage direct and spontaneous use of the foreign language in the classroom... Speaking began with systematic attention to pronunciation. Known words could be used to teach new vocabulary, using mime, demonstration and pictures” (9).

The Direct Method: This method requires teaching learners in the foreign language, making them listen to the language, speak in the language, write in the language, read in the language and think in the language. According to Verghese (57), this method, a logical extension of the Natural Method, “insists that the key to all language learning lies in association; it stresses the needs for direct association between experience and expression in the foreign language”. Experiencing language with the senses – sight, taste, hearing, smelling, touch – and expressing the ideas in words structured in sentences of that target language makes for successful internalization of the uses of the language. Richards and Rodgers (9-10) outline the practical realization of the principles and procedures of this method thus:

1. Classroom instruction was conducted exclusively in the target language.
2. Only everyday vocabulary and sentences were taught.
3. Grammar was taught inductively. [Using individual ideas or facts to give a general rule or conclusion – detail mine].
4. New teaching points were introduced orally.
5. Concrete vocabulary was taught through demonstration, objects, and pictures; abstract vocabulary was taught by association of ideas.
6. Correct pronunciation and grammar were emphasized.
7. Both speech and listening comprehension were taught.

The structural Method: Structure in language refers to the internal arrangements or the component segments of words, phrases (groups), clauses and sentences. On the requirements of this method, Verghese explains “that to secure a practical command of English we should know well how the word

order, the structural words and the word forms are employed to construct sentences or meaningful patterns of expression” (59). This method he further explains “insists on graded structures. That is to say, the simple structure must precede the difficult one”. Hutchinson and Waters (26) elaborating on graded structures state that in structural syllabus, “items are graded so that simpler and more immediately useable structures preceded the more complex ones”. Instantiating this, they present an ESP syllabus based on structural precepts:

1. Simple Present Active
2. Simple Present Passive
3. Simple Present Active and Passive
4. –ing forms
5. Present Perfect; Present Continuous
6. Infinitives
7. Anomalous Finites (ie. Modals)
8. Past Perfect; Conditionals

Evaluating these Methods

None of these methods, in spite of its acceptability when introduced, is independent. Richards and Rodgers (11) report that “a study begun on the state of foreign language teaching concluded that no single method would guarantee successful results”. Verghese (61) affirms this as he refers to the teacher’s eclectic ability to adopt and adapt methods suitable to his classroom environment. This is evident on the weakness of Grammar-Translation Method which Palmer as cited by Verghese (57) stress upon. Palmer describes Grammar-Translation Method as applicable only to a dead language whose ancient documents will be collected, deciphered and analyzed, and that it ignores all considerations of phonetics, pronunciation and acoustic image, and boldly places language on a foundation of alphabets; spellings and writing systems...”. In spite of these weaknesses, Richards and Rodgers (11) report:

The Harvard psychologist Rodger Brown has documented similar problems with strict Direct Method techniques. He described his frustration in observing a teacher performing verbal gymnastics in an attempt to convey the meaning of Japanese words, when translation would have been a much more efficient technique to use.

The recourse to Grammar-Translation Method to facilitate overcoming teaching hitches suggests that a good teacher should be skilful in all the methods and should switch to anyone to make a success of his teachings.

Pivotal Accomplishment of these Fundamentals

The teacher is the pivot of these fundamentals. The teacher knows his subjects, the teaching methods, his society philosophy of education, the syllabus designed, his subject, and the materials for successful realization of the contents of the syllabus. The central position of the teacher is recognized in the National Policy on Education (38) thus:

Since no education system may rise above the quality of its teachers, teacher education shall continue to be given major emphasis in all educational planning and development.

This high premium placed on the teacher constrains education policy makers set down sublime goals expected of a real teacher on the National Policy on Education (38): the teacher should be motivated conscientious and efficient in classroom teaching; the teacher should be encouraged to have spirit of enquiry and creativity; the teacher should be helped to fit into the life of the community and the society at large and enhance their commitment to national goals; the teachers should be provided with the intellectual and professional background adequate for their assignment and make them adaptable to changing situations; the teachers should be committed to the teaching profession.

It is instructive to ask whether these considerations are realizable today. Teachers' recruitment at primary, secondary and tertiary schools controlled by government is dependent on connection with the leaders. The majority of the teachers neither know anything about teaching methodology and the procedures of successful teaching nor do they know about neither the requirements of society nor the needs of the learners nor the goals of syllabus for the contents to be maximally realized.

The result of these cheats called to teach is continuous cheating of society of its philosophy of education. As no one can offer what they do not have, little informed learners are continually graduated to occupy positions they are not qualified to occupy. In politics these certificate holders achieve nothing for their country; in research they are contented with imported ideas, in scholarly conferences they plagiarize other people's works; in teaching they resort to cutting through their ways to secure promotions, appointments and obtain

higher degrees as they cannot flaunt requisites for promotions, appointments and defending their degrees.

English for Specific Purposes, a learner-oriented introduction to encourage learning in all fields of study, is a sublime recognition, but can it be accomplished in Nigeria where mediocrity thrives in ministries, parastatals and institutions of lower and higher learning where it has been flagrantly institutionalized?

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