A Tentative Study on Applying ESP in Effective ELT in China

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I. Introduction

In the 21st century, the development of the new economy pushes forward the changes in education. The role of teachers and students has changed, together with the teaching attitude, methodology, and teaching aid devices. Kern and Warschauer have identified three stages in CALL (computer-aided language learning) development illustrated by the chart below (Fig.1).

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<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teaching modes</td>
<td>Structural</td>
<td>Communicative</td>
<td>Integrative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English-Teaching Paradigm</td>
<td>Grammar-Translation &amp; Audio-Lingual</td>
<td>Communicate Language Teaching</td>
<td>Content-Based, ESP/EAP</td>
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<td>View of Language</td>
<td>Structural (a formal structural system)</td>
<td>Cognitive (a mentally-constructed system)</td>
<td>Socio-cognitive (developed in social interaction)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal Use of Computers</td>
<td>Drill and Practice</td>
<td>Communicative Exercises</td>
<td>Authentic Discourse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal Objective</td>
<td>Accuracy</td>
<td>And Fluency</td>
<td>And Agency</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Exactly enough, it also shows the advancement of ELT with the development of the new technologies. There appears to be a trend away from "Communicative" towards "Integrative ", from structural instruction to CBI and TBI. This gives a good indication that ESP/EAP approach is likely to be dominant over the prevailing ELT methods to encourage real-life tasks. Teachers should engage students to plan and carry out meaningful tasks and to solve problems that are relevant to the students' personal, academic and professional goals.

Indeed, this is an era where all the ELT teachers should be equipped with new innovative techniques to harness their pedagogical approach in the teaching both at the specialty level and at the technical level. It is a plain fact that in English language teaching, no single method is comprehensive enough to give a single-handed support due to the different aspects of language, the great variety of pedagogical factors or diverse types of learners. However, an up-to-date insight into the nature of language from a theoretical point of view will greatly help individual teachers to enhance their
performance in their professional activities. Driven by this motivation, the author made a close study of some hot issues (mainly pedagogical methods and techniques) prevailing currently in the ELT circle, such as, the CLT (Communicative Language Teaching), CBI (Content-Based Instruction), TBI(Task-based Instruction), “I + 1” Hypothesis, “Peer Support”, “Discourse Analysis”, “Genre Analysis”*, to name a few, and found that they all, to a certain extent, bear their relationship with the ESP approach. With such an understanding, we found the theoretical basis for applying ESP in effective EGP instruction.

II. ESP and ESP Approach

Universities and colleges are where most experts-in-the-future are trained and educated. Therefore, General English (GE) for science and engineering students should experience a shift to something more profession-oriented, so that these prospective scientists may have opportunities to be taught to read, discuss and write scientifically in English. It is widely agreed that English should act as a tool that can facilitate profession-oriented students to access modern scientific and technological advances. By examining the learner’s needs more closely, ESP teaching approach is finding more and more applications in ELT in China.

In order to apply ESP, we should have a full understanding of the definition of ESP. The definition continues to evolve as time goes on. Tony Dudley-Evans, co-editor of the ESP Journal, clarified the meaning of ESP, giving an extended definition of ESP in terms of ‘absolute’ and ‘variable’ characteristics. This definition is now regarded as comparatively authentic.

The Definition of ESP (Dudley-Evans, 1997)

Absolute Characteristics
1. ESP is defined to meet specific needs of the learners;
2. ESP makes use of underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves;
3. ESP is centered on the language appropriate to these activities in terms of grammar, lexis, register, study skills, discourse and genre.

Variable Characteristics
1. ESP may be related to or designed for specific disciplines;
2. ESP may use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of General English;
3. ESP is likely to be designed for adult learners, either at a tertiary level institution or in a professional work situation. It could, however, be for learners at secondary school level;
4. ESP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students;
5. Most ESP courses assume some basic knowledge of the language systems.

A close examination of the characteristics and elements of ESP will reveal the essence of the ESP approach. Though it is very complicated by views of linguistic aspects, simply speaking, ESP is a kind of communicative one with some characteristics. Its communicativeness can be revealed in the three major aspects, i.e., the syllabus, the teaching methodology, and the materials of the course..

III. Applying ESP in ELT in China at the Tertiary Level

The author has been in the EST (English for Science & Technology) teaching program for over ten years, offering EST reading and writing courses to science students as well as EST undergraduates & graduate students in the department of Foreign Languages. In the meantime, she offers Business
English (It is, without doubt, an EOP program) as an optional course to English seniors. In her University, there is also a two-year EST training program as a second major for students of Science and Engineering, and she has been assigned to lecture them the course of English Intensive Reading (Comprehensive English Course). It is really of great luck to have the chance to meet the students of different backgrounds and levels. During her years of instruction, she considers it beneficial to apply in class a reformed approach based on ESP principles. When commissioned to take a class of profession-oriented students, a teacher of English probably should fulfill his or her task, paying special attention to the following aspects:

a. Need Analysis------ To Understand the Learner's Needs and Their Language Level
b. Goals/ Objectives ------ To Determine and Design What to Teach
c. Authentic Course Materials------ To Be Meticulous in Choosing Course Materials
d. A Communicative Classroom------ To Use Communicative Approach in Classroom Teaching Activities
e. Course Evaluation------ To Reform the Grading and Evaluation System

The five steps mentioned are basic rules. In the light of concrete needs some specific techniques can be applied, with all their aims being at arousing the interests and improving the abilities of the students. This integrated approach based on ESP is characterized by the inclusion of carefully selected vocabulary, grammatical patterns, themes, skills, and communicative knowledge of English. This clear specification of what is to be taught will ensure that: (1) There will be fewer obstacles for the students because many irrelevant words and expressions are avoided along with the deletion of some of the GE texts; (2) The teacher will teach as the students’ needs direct him, instead of being driven by his personal interests; (3) The students will feel drawn into using English to express what they really want to say, since what they learn in the classroom enables them to do so; (4) The students will improve their specialty studies through the English they would learn, and vice versa. As a result, the students will learn English with far greater interests and ease.

Based on the above reflections, the author conducted several experiments. For example, she has been applying some communicative teaching methods during her instructions, the most commonly welcomed ones of which are the “Translation Teamwork” in the Advanced Reading Course for EST graduate students and the “Business Negotiations Role-Playing” in Business English for English Seniors. It is indeed encouraging and rewarding to see that some of the measures did result in more efficient learning on the part of the students.

As we all know, applying a new approach in ELT with an ESP context is very difficult, but very important, a process. Before teaching, instructors will need to formulate the goals and objectives of the course, conceptualize the content, select teaching materials, plan the course, and be ready to evaluate it. The course developing process should be regarded as an On-going process, focusing on the needs of the particular group of students the course is designed for.

IV. Misapplications and Challenges

The ESP course is based on the purpose, the subject of interests, and the background of the students within one specialty, and therefore need to be “tailor-made”, while the GE instruction stresses the vocabulary items, grammatical structures, functions and general notions common to all registers. So there exists a huge gap between GE and ESP period. So the best way is to develop a GE approach based on ESP. This task will not be fulfilled unless the students are familiar with the rules concerning information structures and are trained to gain an ability to acquire information. Some designers got a
good understanding of this while many others got misled, and hence come the misapplications of all kinds, ranging from the contents, teaching methods to testing systems. Also, inside and outside the classroom, new problems arise one after another, which sometimes seems beyond the teachers’ capacity. Here are some possibilities:

4.1 Course Materials and Exercises in Textbooks

If we take a look at some prevailing textbooks used by Chinese college EGP students, we may find a common fact that a large portion of the texts are designed with some popular scientific contents, but with too many irrelevant lexical terms and expressions. The coursebook itself turns out to be an instruction rather than a facilitator for ELT, and therefore contributes little to speed up the students’ reading without losing comprehension. As to the exercises, many of them just aim at practicing but not meeting the need for communications or interactions, usually a time-wasting and unscientific process.

4.2 Methodology

Specifically, while many General English teachers can be described as using an ESP approach, basing their syllabi on a learner needs analysis and their own specialized knowledge of using English for real communication, the majority of so-called ESP teachers are actually using a traditional approach. Instead of conducting interviews with specialists in the field, analyzing the language that is required in the profession, or even conducting students' needs analysis, many ESP teachers have become slaves of the published textbooks available, unable to evaluate their suitability based on personal experience, and unwilling to do the necessary analysis of difficult specialized texts to verify their contents.

4.3 Need Analysis

A slightly more difficult and controversial area of analysis concerns the language that students will need. Dlaska argues “a detailed language needs analysis is essential in the LSP-context”. Various studies of the language of different disciplines have been carried out, e.g. Howe on academic legal language, Bloor on the language of computer science. However, the language corpus on which to base such an analysis is not always easy to obtain, and it may not provide much more than a short list of common terms. The specification of the language that should be taught is not at all straightforward, and this is often left to the teacher’s or the materials writer’s intuition. We shall therefore need to consider the best way to proceed for this particular study.

Even though very important, students' data should not be overused. Finding out this information does not mean that teachers should teach only what their students want. Of course, teaching cannot take place in isolation. There are certain things, such as curriculum, institutional guidelines, and standardization, etc. that cannot and may not be ignored. In developing a new course, students' analysis will help teachers bring together the required and desired messages in formulating goals and objectives, conceptualizing the content of the course, selecting teaching materials, and course assessment. However, if “I + 1” turns out to be a “I+2” or “I +3”…, the in-taking process of the students will be doomed to failure.

V. Other Important Factors in Applying ESP Effectively

Developing a new course is not just planning a course. In teaching, instructors are constant learners, with professional experience, views, teaching concepts, and methodological knowledge continuously changing. From year to year, we have different students with different needs and background. That will inevitably make it necessary and important to modify every course and adjust it to a particular group of students. Furthermore, quite often in the classroom things take place in an unexpected or unplanned way. Flexible teachers are open to making necessary changes while teaching. They can see what can or should be modified, added, or changed to make the course reflect students'
interests and needs. During this on-going process the instructor should also see to the following aspects:

5.1 Discourse Analysis

Why do we use discourse analysis? The usefulness of these guidelines in an ESP setting is obvious. There are usually different levels even in academic classes, but there are likely to be many levels spreading a broader range when there is one teacher to teach one class for all levels. If all levels of students are learning the same grammar, the teacher can adjust his/her expectations of their performance of that particular grammar element. Students can be grouped by ability for some activities and be given a more or less complex text to deal with in their particular group.

Presenting grammar in a cluster for that particular discourse will help students know the options (verbs, pronouns, etc.) that they have when speaking or writing in that form. Using a discourse analysis approach will help a teacher when he or she has to teach specific tasks that have to be mastered by his or her students.

5.2 Turning Teacher-centeredness towards Student-centeredness

True enough, by introducing a student-centered view, CLT helps to create a supportive atmosphere in classroom. However, it proves inadequate in coping with some students’ personality factors, such as their passivity, anxiety, low tolerance of ambiguity, lack of creative thinking and resentment toward learner-learner interaction. This phenomenon has a lot to do with our culture, which sometimes exerts a pervasive impact on our students’ minds. What’s more, the long-standing teacher-centeredness of the traditional Chinese educational system has made the teacher the dominant figure of the class, while the students only need to present themselves as attentive audience with taking notes as their primary job. When CLT requires them to become active participants, they naturally become bewildered. They may consider all the CLT activities a waste of precious class time that should be used by the teacher to deliver knowledge. To solve this problem, teachers ought to try hard to seek balance in order to bring the advantages of CLT into full play. It is no easy way, but a goal we should strive for.

5.3 Critical Thinking

The issue is brought up here because it has always been neglected in the ELT circle in China, though it is of crucial importance in ESP programs. More recently, what critical thinking means and how it might be taught have become highly debated questions for L2 learning theorists and practitioners. The complexity of the term needs to be acknowledged and very carefully addressed. Some educationalists have referred to it as “reasonable, reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do” (Ennis, 1992:22) and “a democratic learning process examining power relations and social inequities” (Benesch 1996). So ESP is NOT specialized subject teaching. It is NOT ONLY about study skills like note-taking, summarizing, argumentation, etc. It is about the development of critical thinking capability and training the mind.

The ESP course needs to be designed with the main aim of developing the critical thinking and academic writing skills students require. The author suggests here that for many Chinese college students who have studied in a very different educational culture, the need to develop the ability to think critically may challenge the very foundations upon which their previous learning experiences have been based.

5.4 Inter-cultural Communication

Although some students may be interested only in language learning, others, particularly those who need English in their work, are recognizing that an understanding of the history and culture associated with the language is essential for effective communication. ESP/EAP is not culture-free. On the contrary, ESP/EAP learning should be conducted in the context of intercultural communication,
since language itself is a part of culture and culture is a part of a language. During instruction, a great effort should be made to cultivate the students’ awareness of target culture as well as their cross-cultural communicative competence. One of the goals of an ESP course, for instance, is to achieve intercultural communicative competence. Students are developing language skills, but this is accomplished through the integration of the socio-cultural component into the teaching of various elements of the language.

5.5 Teacher Training

Since the integrated approach succeeds in avoiding the blindness in the teaching by 1) analyzing the learners’ needs as its starting point; 2) training the learner’s communicative competence as its aim; 3) adopting the rules for language use as its teaching contents; and 4) having communicative activities running through the class sessions at most times, it ought to show great strength. However, in the meanwhile it sets a higher and stricter requirement for ELT practitioners. In order to develop real effective programs, trained ESP teachers are in urgent need. The teacher should be a good facilitator and an excellent inspirer in class. In such a course, the function the teacher should perform is “to train”, instead of “to teach”. Therefore the teacher must broaden his or her methodological outlooks, take the initiative to carry out researches on teaching methods, and try hard to learn such useful courses as Applied Linguistics, ESP Theory and Practice, Communicative Syllabus Design, Discourse Analysis, and if possible, one or more relevant professional courses.

We need to train ESP teachers not only to learn the practice but also to learn how to think and reflect on their learning. They have to obtain a new mind set. This demands a significant development period. They should be able to teach all areas of knowledge and skills required by non-native students to achieve communicative competence and academic proficiency in an English speaking environment (EAP) and all areas of knowledge and skills required by the learners to achieve communicative competence in pre- and post-experience professional contexts (ESP). For the time being, a qualified teacher must equip himself/ herself with readiness to go further into professional development and to build on experiential knowledge by a deeper knowledge of the current theory and practical applications. We can imagine the qualifications, and we’ve learned how great a disparity there exists between an internationalized ELT staff and us. So it is imperative for us to enlarge our theoretical knowledge and enrich our pedagogic experience.

The learning process for above knowledge gives teachers the required skills they need to deliver high quality training in these fields. It focuses on the professional development of those who teach either EAP, or ESP, such as Business, Law and Medicine in professional institutions worldwide. The teachers need to promote their professional development through exploration, rigorous analysis and understanding of contemporary issues in EAP/ESP. We need powerful institutions, which can provide constant linking of theory to practice to EL instructors. At the same time, teachers should try their best to create practical foundations and confidence for their current and future research interests in ESP/EAP, so as to enhance their career prospects.

VI. Conclusion:

The ESP approach, which is becoming one of the most prestigious fashions in recent years, is commonly thought to belong to the communicative approach, with definition of language needs, concept of communicative competence, communicative language teaching, discourse analysis and so on as its major concerns. It is well accepted that ESP is about teaching with flexibility to students from a sound theoretical and methodological base. Taking the China’s present situation of tertiary education into consideration, we need an integrated GE approach based on the ESP theory and practice.

ESP uses the communicative approach to language teaching which is based on the following assumptions: language is best acquired when students engage in authentic tasks, when the right of control is with the student, allowing him or her to take initiative, when teacher acts mostly as a facilitator, and when activities and tasks mimic real life situations. It is believed that these objects are
best achieved when a content-based approach is used, which allows the students to develop their communication skills and language competence by focusing on a specific topic for a given period of time. ESP is, pragmatic. In this sense, it is strongly felt that we should set the course on the same principle as that of an MBA (an intensive, flexible method, responsive to the students’ needs).

ESP is about teaching with flexibility to students from a sound theoretical and methodological base. The author thinks the emphasis should be put on curriculum design as well as course instruction. Additional attention should also be paid to cultivating the student’s ability to think critically and their cross-cultural communication awareness.

The author tries to seek some gradual changes which she hopes will result in more efficient learning on the part of the students. The integrated approach is, simply speaking, an eclectic approach in a learner-centered environment. It is her sincerest hope that all the observations presented in this thesis will lend insight into the challenges facing the ESL instructors working in the field of ELT at the tertiary level in China.

References


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