

Teaching Business Vocabulary: ESP Perspectives

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Abstract: The present paper discuss mainly on the connection between ESP and the principles & techniques of teaching vocabulary. The latest studies in the field of ELT try to prove that accuracy and fluency in English could not possibly be obtained without acquiring a rich vocabulary.

Keywords: vocabulary, English business, ESP

1. Introduction

Recent developments in teaching methodologies or learning theories have emphasized the increasingly important role vocabulary plays in English language acquisition. Although considered as coming second place (after grammar teaching) by some English teaching methods such as the Grammar-Translation Method, the Direct Method or the Audio-Lingual Method, vocabulary teaching came to the fore during the 70's, with the advent of the Communicative Approach. It was during that period that course designers and teachers became aware of the communicative value of a core vocabulary and ever since the part vocabulary plays in a foreign language acquisition has constantly increased. The latest studies in the field try to prove that accuracy and fluency in English could not possibly be obtained without acquiring a rich vocabulary: "If you spend most of your time studying grammar, your English will not improve very much. You will see most improvement if you learn more words and expressions. You can say very little with grammar, but you can say almost anything with words."¹

This new trend in English Language Teaching seems to be best applied to ESP, which has emphasised the need for teaching specialized vocabulary ever since its beginnings, back in the 1960's. The main objective of English for Specific Purposes has always been the teaching of highly specialized vocabulary to specialists in various domains. Hence, the tight connection between ESP and teaching vocabulary principles & techniques.

It is precisely on this connection between ESP and the principles & techniques of teaching vocabulary that this paper focuses. My interest in this large area of ELT was raised by my very students, who used to say: "We don't need any grammar / grammar exercises, we are interested in studying vocabulary." My first impulse was: "They

have problems with grammatical accuracy, they find grammar boring and difficult, so they want to get rid of it." Part of this first impulse is true; it seems that – surprisingly good, advanced students still have problems with accuracy in English, however this is not the main issue in this paper. The issue is that most of the ESP students are well aware of the importance of vocabulary in studying a foreign language, they are well aware of their need to enrich their vocabulary as well as to improve their communicative competence. What I shall try to prove here is that teaching vocabulary is extremely important for an ESP class and it should be the first concern for both the ESP student and the ESP practitioner (Tony D Evans' and Maggie Jo St John's term for teacher).

The first step that an ESP practitioner should take when embarking on the difficult process of designing an ESP vocabulary syllabus is to identify the target students and the target situation, to perform, in other words, a needs analysis. The target students in this particular case are 1st year students in Tourism. So we are dealing here with a specific branch of the more general area of ESP: English for Business Purposes, more precisely with English for General Business Purposes (EGBP), which usually deals with courses for "pre-experience learners or those at the very early stages of their career".²

The target situation seems to be somewhere in between English for Academic Purposes and English for Professional Purposes, since it involves both academic activities (such as reading textbooks, articles and other materials, or writing essays, examination answers, dissertations and reports) and actual activities that students may need to carry out for their future jobs.

The students may need to read some books or articles related to their main subjects (Economics, Geography, Mathematics, Business Organization, Statistics...) that are available only in English; they may

¹ Thornbury, Scott in *How to Teach Vocabulary*, London: Pearson Education Limited, 2002, p13

² Dudley-Evans, Tony & Maggie Jo St John *Developments in English for Specific Purposes. A Multi-Disciplinary Approach*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p55

want to take part in some conferences where the papers must be presented in English. In order to achieve the necessary competence for being able to perform all these activities, they must be exposed to as many business texts and business contexts as possible. But the process of analysing the target situation must not stop here; the ESP practitioner should also take into account his students' delayed needs. Defined by Tony Dudley-Evans and Maggie Jo St John as "needs that arise either in the final year (for example project work) or as communication needs in future work"³, these delayed needs seem to be a powerful motivation for students. ESP students have become aware lately of their need of being proficient in at least one foreign language if they want to find a job after having graduated. They are thus interested in being taught how to communicate in particular situations, how to cope with the business environment of their future jobs. Therefore the ESP practitioner should try to identify as many jobs, as many business contexts, as many communication situations as possible. After having established the target students, after having thoroughly analysed the target situation, after having determined the immediate needs as well as the delayed needs, the ESP practitioner should take the second step in the process of designing an ESP vocabulary syllabus: establishing what materials he/she is going to use during his/her ESP classes. Hutchinson and Waters speak about three different methods of designing ESP materials: materials evaluation, materials adaptation and materials development. Materials development seems to be a method used mainly by teachers and course designers with much experience in teaching and writing materials. An ESP practitioner who does not have much experience in ESP materials writing should focus on materials evaluation and sometimes materials adaptation. Since the range of ESP materials available on the market at the moment is quite large, the teacher has the possibility of choosing from among them and of adapting them to his students' particular needs.

The process of choosing the suitable materials for an EGBP course is not an easy one, comprising, in its turn, several smaller steps: gathering, analysing, comparing and deciding. The ESP practitioner has to gather materials that could match the target needs, to analyse and compare them, and finally to decide which of them meets the target learners' requirements. What kind of materials would make a better choice for students in Tourism? The syllabus should follow the general outline of a Business English course, giving the students the opportunity of encountering various

business contexts, various business communication situations.

The materials should be related but not identical to what the students are taught in their main subjects; they should be a kind of continuation of what the learners are studying in their main subjects, they should offer them supplementary information on their topics of interest. The ESP course should focus on material that is parallel to the main subject course, without being actually part of it. It would be boring and unnecessary for ESP students to read/hear the same thing twice, once in their native language, then in English. The ESP course should offer them supplementary, up-to-date information related to their area of professional interest. If the ESP practitioner wants to teach, for instance, vocabulary related to Business Organization, he/she could do it by presenting a text that describes a company the students are already familiar with. Or he/she could do it by talking about all the steps that must be taken and all the papers that are necessary for setting up a company in Romania.

Being an exemplification, the text revises students' knowledge on that particular issue, offering at the same time new, interesting information on topics that may be of great interest to the students. And the exemplifications can continue. If the teacher wants to introduce vocabulary related to management, he/she can do it by presenting the organization chart of a hotel or of a restaurant, or by speaking about the corporate strategy that a particular, preferably well known company, tries to apply. If he/she wants to teach vocabulary related to marketing, he/she can present some real market studies, or he/she can analyze and compare several advertisements taken from the local newspapers. The same with Statistics (the recent census organized in Romania being an interesting topic for discussion), Geography (where one could endlessly speak about England's/United States of America's places to be visited) or Law (another large, up-to-date topic for discussion). Tony Dudley-Evans and Maggie Jo St John speak about the passing from TALO to TAVI, that is from Text as a Linguistic Object to Text as a Vehicle of Information.

The key principles of this new approach to text reading would be: "extracting information accurately and quickly is more significant than language details; understanding the macrostructure comes before language study and application of the information in the text is of paramount importance".⁴ Texts are considered direction finders, they are meant to awaken interest and to establish purpose.

³ ibidem, p 40

⁴ Dudley-Evans, Tony & Maggie Jo St John Developments in English for Specific Purposes. A Multi-Disciplinary Approach, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p96

We have seen so far that the EGBP teacher can choose from among a large variety of topics related to his students' main subjects or to their future jobs. He has the possibility of presenting his students new, interesting, up-to-date information related to their professional knowledge and interests. But where from should he take these materials? As I said earlier in this article, materials evaluation seems to be the less difficult and the handiest method for designing an EGBP course for students in Tourism.

The teacher may choose from among all the materials available on the market and, if necessary, he/she can adapt them to his/her students' specific needs. What exactly do these materials include? First of all coursebooks, workbooks, cassettes, CD ROMs, that is materials especially created for students and for being used in the classroom. One such example would be "English for International Tourism", a material comprising a coursebook, a workbook, a teacher's resource book and three cassettes and intended for professionals working in the tourism industry and for learners preparing for a career in tourism. But a coursebook is not the only choice an ESP teacher can make. Not even the best one.

Recent research in ESP teaching/learning methodologies seems to point to authentic texts as the best choice for an ESP vocabulary syllabus. Authentic texts are referred to by Scott Thornbury as those texts that have not been "especially written for the language classroom"⁵; such as: newspapers and magazines articles, tape recorded real conversations, videotape recorded news bulletins, advertisements, songs and movies fragments, official documents, www information. All these materials are meant to raise students' interest in the ESP class, to offer them real life situations, to confront them with real life problems. Speaking about ESP materials, Tony Dudley-Evans and Maggie Jo St John emphasised the need for stimulation and motivation: "To stimulate and motivate, materials need to be challenging yet achievable; to offer new ideas and information whilst being grounded in the learners' experience and knowledge; to encourage fun and creativity. The input must contain concepts and/or knowledge that are familiar but it must also offer something new, a reason to communicate, to get involved."⁶

The conclusion we can draw so far would be that ESP students should be exposed to a large

variety of materials and to a large number of styles. An ESP vocabulary syllabus should offer a combination of materials: textbooks (for formal, didactic/pedagogic style), newspaper articles (for written, journalistic style), tape recorded business presentations (for formal, oral style), tape recorded/videotape recorded casual conversations (for informal style), and even songs or movie fragments (for slang).

A final step in designing a business vocabulary syllabus involves the choice of a teaching methodology: how is the ESP teacher going to introduce and practice this vocabulary? Recent research favors an eclectic approach to ESP teaching methodology. The ESP teacher should try to select several teaching methodologies and adapt them to his students' needs. The Communicative Approach could be a first choice, since the students' delayed needs involve mainly business communication situations and "language learning comes about through using language communicatively, rather than through practicing language skills"⁷.

The best way to introduce new words is by using them in context, that is by reading a text (usually a short one), by listening to a conversation or by involving students in a conversation. It seems that "for vocabulary building purposes, texts whether spoken or written have enormous advantages. [...] The fact that words are in context increases the chances of learners appreciating not only their meaning but their typical environments, such as their associated collocations or grammatical structures."⁸ Texts also help students grasp the meaning of a new word without necessarily looking it up in the dictionary. A new word is best explained and understood if it is presented in a relevant context and the teacher has several methods of clarifying its meaning: by providing an example situation, by giving several example sentences, by giving synonyms, antonyms or superordinate terms or by giving a full definition. Finally, if none of these methods works, he/she should give the corresponding translation of the word into the students' native language.

Besides the Communicative Approach the ESP practitioner can also take into account some other teaching methodologies, such as Content-based or Task-based Approaches, which have in common "teaching through communication rather than for it."⁹ They give students the possibility of using English to learn it rather

⁵ Thornbury, Scott How to Teach Vocabulary, London: Pearson Education Limited, 2002, p53

⁶ Dudley-Evans, Tony & Maggie Jo St John Developments in English for Specific Purposes. A Multi-Disciplinary Approach, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p172

⁷ Richards, Jack & Theodore S. Rodgers "Communicative Language Teaching" in Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching: a Description & Analysis, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, p72

⁸ Thornbury, Scott How to Teach Vocabulary, London: Pearson Education Limited, 2002, p53

⁹ Larsen-Freeman, Diane Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, p137 (2nd ed.)

than learning to use English. The Content-based Approach has the merit of integrating “the learning of language with the learning of some other content, often academic subject matter.” This approach has always been used in ESP classrooms, where most of the materials are directly related to the students’ main subjects or profession. Task-based instruction is another recommended teaching method for an ESP class, since it tries to provide learners with a natural context for language use. The students in Tourism may be required, for instance, to come up with a strategy for saving Romanian tourism industry; or to write a letter by which they try to convince some travellers to choose the offers of their travel agency.

Project work is again a fruitful strategy in ESP teaching but it can be used only for advanced learners. As an example of project work, students in Tourism may be required to organize a conference at a hotel in their town, or to try to edit a few pages magazine, having tourism and travelling as a main theme.

Recent writings speak about a new approach to ELT: the Lexical Approach, which “foregrounds vocabulary learning, both in the form of individual, high frequency words, and in the form of word combination.”¹⁰ Scott Thornbury says that his new approach to language teaching is based on several general principles, such as: a syllabus should be organized around meaning; the most frequent words encode the most frequent meaning; words typically co-occur with other words; these co-occurrences are an aid to fluency.

The theorists of this new approach argue that a syllabus of meanings (semantic syllabus) would be more useful than a syllabus of structures, as it seems to better meet the students’ communicative needs. They say that meaning is primarily encoded in words, and that “language consists of grammaticalised lexis, not lexicalised grammar.”¹¹ This new approach to language learning is defined as a process of item learning, as opposed to rule learning.

I wind up this paper by stating once again that ESP courses should focus on vocabulary teaching as much as possible, exposing students to as many communicative situations as possible. The ESP practitioner who is, at the same time, a teacher, a course designer, a materials provider, a researcher and an evaluator is supposed to be able to identify the target situation, to perform a thorough needs analysis, to select materials and to adapt them to his/her students’ needs.

When choosing the appropriate materials, the practitioner should focus mainly on authentic materials, as students need to be exposed to real life situations, to real business contexts. In order to attract the students, these materials must not only be related to the learners’ main subjects or profession, they must also offer supplementary information on their topics of interest. Because, “as language teachers, we must arouse interest in words and a certain excitement in personal development in this area.”

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¹⁰ Thornbury, Scott *How to Teach Vocabulary*, London: Pearson Education Limited 2002, p112

¹¹ ibidem, p114