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## Subject specificity in ESP: How much does the teacher need to know of the subject?

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# Subject specificity in ESP: How much does the teacher need to know of the subject?

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- 1 The question of subject specificity remains a controversial issue in English for Academic purposes (Johns & Dudley-Evans 1991). Should EAP concentrate on general 'study skills' appropriate for students of any discipline or should it attempt to prepare students for the specific demands made on them in their subject departments? Are students motivated by more specific work or do they prefer to have a more general course? Can English teachers cope with materials that require some greater knowledge of the subject matter than is required in teaching more general EAP?
- 2 A number of practitioners have argued for a more general approach. Williams (1978) proposed that EAP should adopt a 'wide-angle' approach in which the appropriate language and skills are taught through a variety of topics of general interest rather than through texts taken from students' own discipline.
- 3 This position appears to be supported by Widdowson (1983) in his book *Learning Purpose and Language Use*, and by many EAP teachers and materials writers (Spack 1988; Jordan 1980, 1990; Hamp-Lyons & Heasley 1987).
- 4 Hutchinson and Waters, in particular, have in a number of influential articles (e.g., Hutchinson & Waters 1980) and their book *English for Specific Purposes* (Hutchinson & Waters 1987) argued that narrow-angle ESP is demotivating and irrelevant. They suggest a 'common-core' ESP approach for students of any discipline using texts, topics and situations from a variety of subject areas.
- 5 The case for a 'common-core' approach can be accepted up to a certain point; there are many features of English for Academic Purposes that do not differ across the range of disciplines and it is clearly more efficient to produce materials that can be used with students from these different disciplines. In fact, the majority of classes run in British universities for overseas students follow this principle. But these classes are often

supplemented by classes that are run in certain departments that aim to help students with the specific demands of studying in those departments. Classes may be organised on a collaborative basis involving the preparation of materials outside the classroom or may be team-taught by a language teacher and a subject lecturer (Henderson & Skehan 1980; Johns & Dudley-Evans 1980).

- 6 The justification for these subject specific classes is that students do have problems in adjusting to the demands made on them by their departments and need to be shown how, for example, how different subjects favour different modes of argumentation, tell different 'stories' and have different agendas. We have argued elsewhere (Johns & Dudley-Evans 1991) that the case for concentrating solely on the common-core aspects of academic English is overstated and that in many situations (though not all) students will be more motivated by ESP classes that help them with the problems they have in following the actual lectures they are attending and in writing their assignments than in classes that introduce a number of generalised strategies for listening comprehension or academic writing.
- 7 We can also draw on discourse analysis to make a case for the more specific classes. There is clear evidence that even at the most general level there are significant differences between the kind of writing that students of science and engineering on the one hand and students of social science and humanities on the other undertake.
- 8 Casanave and Hubbard (1992: 36) show, for example, that students of Humanities and Social Sciences have to carry out a wide range of writing tasks including critical summaries, problem solving/analytical tasks, brief research papers and long research papers, and that no one type predominates over the others. With students of Science and Humanities problem solving/analytical tasks make up virtually 60% of all writing tasks.
- 9 Within a specific discipline there may also be particular features that distinguish it from other, even closely related, disciplines. Berkenkotter, Huckin and Ackerman (1991) show how a student enrolled in a PhD programme in Rhetoric at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, USA had difficulty in adjusting the writing style he had developed while doing a B.A. in English Literature to the essentially social scientific discourse conventions expected in the Rhetoric programme. Herrington (1985) in a study of the writing requirements in a department of Chemical Engineering showed that even within one discipline there may be variation in the discourse patterns in the different subject courses that make up the discipline.
- 10 Hansen (1988) presents a particularly interesting and comprehensive study of differences in two disciplinary cultures. She compared the argumentation in two papers on basically the same topic – the life satisfaction amongst single-parent Afro-American women in similar areas in Florida, USA – but written by writers from two very different disciplines in the Social Sciences, one from Sociology, the other from Social Anthropology. The two writers establish authority for their claims in very different ways. In the Sociology paper this is done by means of the "positivist" methodology, beginning with a Statement of the Problem and moving through a Review of the Literature, a Statement of the Hypothesis and a Description of the Research Design to a Statement of Results, which, in turn, leads into a Discussion of Results and Conclusions. In other words the writer makes his claims through the standard 'scientific' method, in which the research question is seen as emerging from the previous research, and the data gathered are supported by reference to previous work and form the basis for a number of knowledge claims.

- 11 The role of the researcher is barely mentioned. In the Social Anthropology paper, by contrast, there is a strong narrative presence, the first person forms of 'I' and 'we' are used and there is considerable self reflection on the part of the researcher about the effect that her presence may have had on the behaviour of the participants in the study. Furthermore the researcher sees her role as an 'apprentice' learning the rules of behaviour in the community studied, and as a writer who presents her findings through dialogues in which those studied speak for themselves. The main warrant that she provides for her findings is that she was there and made the observations herself.<sup>1</sup>
- 12 What this shows clearly is that a tertiary level student, whether a native or non-native speaker, learning to write in a new subject area will need to learn the particular conventions that apply to the discourse community that he or she aspires to be come a member of. The common-core EAP writing classes using materials such as those referred to above are unlikely to be sufficient in themselves to enable the student to cope with the various writing assignments that are required of him or her. This can be done in team taught classes (Johns & Dudley-Evans 1981) peer review classes (Belcher 1990) or one to one consultations (Dudley-Evans 1988).
- 13 What are the implications of this argument developed so far in this paper for the ESP teacher? Does the ESP teacher need a considerable knowledge of the content of various disciplines if he or she is to be able to teach the more specialist materials required if one is to go beyond the common core? Strange as it may seem, I would argue that one actually needs less knowledge of the content than one might need when one is teaching more basic level common core ESP classes. For a relatively general ESP class teaching, for example, one of the Nucleus or Focus course books one needs some kind of understanding of the contexts that are exploited for the presentation and practice of relevant semi-technical language and grammatical points. In other words, if one is using the Carbon Cycle to introduce lexical and grammatical points related to the notion of Cause and Effect as in Nucleus General Science Unit 8 (Bates & Dudley-Evans 1976) or the production of steel to introduce the description of process as in Nucleus Engineering Unit 6 (Dudley-Evans, Smart & Nall 1978), one needs to have some understanding of the content in order to generate through questions or other techniques practice or extension of the target linguistic items. By contrast, when one is teaching study skills courses, e.g. listening comprehension, or academic writing, one needs much less knowledge of the content of the contexts exploited than of the nature of the actual skills themselves in other words, the EAP teacher needs a full understanding of the various micro-skills involved in the macro-skills of academic listening, writing, reading and speaking. The same is the case with more specific work in specific departments. Clearly one needs an interest in the discipline and a willingness to find out about the genre conventions and the favoured 'stories', but one does not necessarily need to have detailed knowledge of the actual content. One needs to try to find out how the discipline works, what sort of questions they are seeking answers to rather than necessarily know or understand all the answers. As in all ESP work an interest in or knowledge of the content of the discipline helps, but reading widely in the subject to improve knowledge of content may be less relevant than reading some of the more sociologically influenced rhetorical studies of disciplines such as Biology (Myers 1990) Physics (Bazerman 1989) or Economics (Henderson, Dudley-Evans and Backhouse, 1992) To put it very simply, one needs to know more about the 'savoir-faire' of the discipline than the actual 'savoir'.

- 14 To take this a stage further, the ESP teacher should be interested in whether a particular discipline favours a positivist methodology as in the case of Sociology mentioned above or a more personal humanistic approach as in the case of Social Anthropology. One can find out what kinds of evidence constitute acceptable support or 'warrants' for knowledge claims in a subject. One can explore the way that citation and referencing is done. One can understand the role of statistics in a subject without actually understanding the methods of statistical testing. In all these areas the ESP teacher can provide insights into the methodology and conventions of the students' discipline that may not be immediately apparent to the students or to their supervisors. To take on this role, the ESP teacher must be prepared both to take these aspects seriously as areas of research and to work on a collaborative basis with interested staff in the actual departments to prepare teaching materials and to carry out relevant research into disciplinary conventions.
- 15 The suggestions I have made in this paper may seem to make the role of the ESP teacher a rather difficult one. I am saying that at certain levels, notably intermediate level general ESP teaching, he or she needs some knowledge of the subject content that is being used as the context for language practice.
- 16 But I have argued that at higher levels, by contrast, one may need much less knowledge of content and much more understanding of both the general nature of communication in the academic world, and the particular variations in specific disciplines. Research into the patterns of communication in the general academic community as well as in specific discourse communities (e.g., Swales 1990) should definitely be seen as the concern of the ESP teacher. Furthermore, the process by which the findings of that research are applied to the preparation of teaching materials and classroom teaching should be seen as the challenge and the stimulation of ESP teaching.

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## NOTES

1. Clearly there may be other ways of presenting an argument in both Sociology and Anthropology.

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