

ENGLISH FOR CAREERS

Various Authors
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Among the many debates that are currently taking place in the field of teaching English as a foreign language one of the most fiercely waged is that concerning English for specific purposes. The debate has a linguistic component, ie. what are the characteristics of the English used professionally by Physicists, by Doctors, by Accountants, by Economists. Are these characteristics definable and in what respect do these different Englishes have elements in common? The debate has a pedagogic element, ie. if there is a special English, how do we teach it and when can it be introduced; does a student first require a basis of what is commonly called general English before he can begin special English?

The debate also has an element of interest to applied linguists. Is special English a matter of grammar or vocabulary or both or something more? While the debate rages as is common in our field, students are present in classrooms and have to be taught and so while the debate goes on and research goes on so does the teaching and the production of materials.

The present state of the art seems to indicate that English for specific purposes is best introduced after a general foundation has been laid, that ESP is not a pure matter of technical vocabulary nor of structural knowledge alone but that what the ESP student primarily needs is help in understanding the communicative purpose of the speaker or writer.

It is against this background that we have to consider the English for Careers series which consists of some 25 titles covering such fields as Air Travel, Computer Programming, Finance, Tourism, Accounting, Chemical Engineering, Mechanical Engineering, Mining, Agriculture, etc. Each book consists of between 8 and 10 reading passages covering different aspects of the profession under consideration. The units are usually preceded by a vocabulary section introducing new special terms and are followed by a variety of comprehension exercise, discussion topics, vocabulary practice exercises of a fairly traditional type. The aim in all the books seems to be a mixture of informing the student through the reading passages on the subject matter of the discipline and introducing him to some of the specialised vocabulary involved.

All the books are attractively produced with in some cases excellent photographs and what from the classroom teacher's point of view, is in

fact, more important, good diagrams and line drawings on which a variety of supplementary exercises can be based. In this connection the Language of Civil Engineering in English by Eugene Hall is particularly good as in the Language of Accounting in English by Sandra Costinett.

One of the problems of ESP materials writing is to fall into the trap of attempting to teach the discipline rather than the language of the discipline and my impression of the series as a whole is that there is too much concern with content and too little with language.

Another of the problems which is as yet unsolved is whether the language used in ESP texts should be contrived or authentic. The difficulty with contrived language is that it tends to simplify or even distort the special subject and the problem with authentic language is that it is very often too difficult for the student. The authors of the English for Careers series have opted for a type of hybrid between these two poles and the result is a not unacceptable layman's view of the subject matter.

Where I find the books deficient sometimes in the extreme, is in the exercise types offered for the student or teacher to exploit. In the main the exercises are directed towards native speakers of the language rather than to foreign learners. This in my view greatly reduces the value of the series for the busy teacher since he would have to spend a great deal of time producing his own exercise types on the texts. As they stand the series will be valuable as source material for specific English or as extensive reading matter for fairly advanced students. As class texts without supplementary material their use will be extremely limited.

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