

ESP IN MEXICO - PRESENT AND FUTURE;
STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES*

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I regard ESP as an approach, not a methodology or a miracle cure, which should be an integrated part, not an isolated limb, within the overall framework of current developments in English as a Foreign Language Teaching.

When approached sensibly and implemented successfully I regard ESP approaches as a positive advance, and I don't think in Mexico we need share some writers' fears that - "ESP is in danger of becoming a juggernaut" (1) - in other words that we drag it in like an idol on a huge cart and as teachers blindly throw ourselves under its wheels without critically examining our devotion, or even worse ruthlessly sacrifice our students to it. We do, however, have to be aware that ESP is sometimes regarded, as Chris Brumfit has pointed out, as a mere "slogan" (2) - a kind of bandwagon that we can jump onto simply because it seems attractive and fashionable, and without really being aware of what it involves, or reflecting on the dangers and advantages of such an approach.

Rather I think ESP when properly applied is a logical development and extension of EFL teachers recent awareness of, and exploration of the (inter)relationship between linguistic form and communicative function in language learning. It implies that the aim of language learning - which I take to be the ability to communicate in a variety of ways - is dependent upon the learner being able to use language which is not exclusively or even necessarily grammatically correct - but also and more importantly appropriate to the situation in which it is used. Such an approach can't be separated for example from communicative methodologies, or discourse analysis or the concern for identifying specific learner needs and the skills to fulfill those needs, or from a concern with improved classroom management and interaction, or from more learner-centred approaches --- and so the list could be extended. Above all these approaches stem from the premise that the learner (not the teacher) - and the learner's specific purposes, are the key component in the language learning process and as Chris Candlin so aptly puts it "A view of language as communication

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implies teaching materials which interrelate form, function and strategy, in a methodology which promotes participation by the learner in the process of interpreting meanings." (3) That is what I feel the essence of an ESP approach to be and how it is essentially an integral part of communicative teaching methodologies.

With this general framework in mind I'd now like to say a little about what I as an outsider after 1 year in Mexico, subjectively see to be some of the strengths and weaknesses of ESP work here today, and where I hope it might develop in the next few years.

At the National ESP Convention held in Xalapa in June 1980 I tried to base my thoughts around four particular areas: materials development, research, teacher training and evaluation. In this paper I don't propose to take any of these areas specifically - but hope to include some comments on them while looking at three general aspects in particular, though not dealing with them strictly in chronological order:

Firstly - where and how ESP in Mexico seems to be within the mainstream of work and development taking place in ESP in a number of different countries.

Secondly - what I see to be the particular emphases of work here in Mexico, and where they may be somewhat different from a number of other places.

Thirdly, and finally, a few possible areas where further development is needed, which I think could become important new aspects here of ESP in the next few years.

Over the past 5 or 6 years ESP in Mexico - as in many other countries - has manifested a change of emphasis away from the traditional, structurally based general English course - the whole of the language approach and seeing the learning of English as a subject in its own right - towards the increasing awareness that skill in using a foreign language (in this case English) as a means of communication is not necessarily a consequence of attempting to learn either the whole of the language (whatever that may be) or within a formal system. Language considered primarily as communication then no longer views English as a separate subject being learned for its own sake, but becomes as Henry Widdowson says "an aspect of other subjects." English for Specific Purposes in other words sees the language as a tool, not an end in itself but rather as having an auxiliary role as a medium of access to knowledge in a wide range of specialist subject areas - biology, engineering, architecture, medicine and so on - principally being studied at tertiary level. It is concerned

with providing students with the vital and basic ability to use English to receive (and probably to a lesser extent) to convey information associated with their own specialist subjects, information which is only readily available in English, and thus needs to be extracted from a whole range of sources, principally in this country written ones like textbooks, articles, journals and pamphlets.

This approach then shifts concentration away from the linguistic form to a much closer look at the communicative functions of English - appropriacy of use being the aim rather than correctness of expression. It involves emphasising actual language use rather than usage - the sort of idealised language one often finds in general EFL course books for example. It is more concerned with what some people call text realisation (but I prefer to call discourse) than with text itself. By this I mean ESP for example looks closely at the ways in which sentences and paragraphs combine to produce coherent and continuous stretches of language - complete acts of communication in fact. It embraces an understanding of inter-sentential relationships (as well as those within sentences) - and sees the use of link words, connectors and various forms of reference to things earlier in a passage or further on - as being fundamental to interpreting what is going on in a reading passage or a spoken dialogue, etc. It understands that a reader or listener must be capable of appraising the message at a conceptual level too; must be able to recognise how ideas are developed through strategies like prediction, deduction and so on - all this I would call the ability; a key ability of being able to decode discourse units - which is one of the specific communicative skills a learner must acquire if he is to use the tool of language effectively. Students who respond to such an approach are after all fulfilling their common desire to seek operational or functional satisfaction or what David Wilkins calls "instrumental satisfaction" - not descriptive satisfaction in their language learning.

Very closely allied to all these aspects is a concern for authentic materials being presented to the learner to facilitate his improving his performance skills - for example being able to comprehend how English realises functional categories like hypothesising, exemplifying or defining - all of which the learner will be familiar with in his own language and specialist area - but which may well operate somewhat differently in English. ESP approaches should acknowledge the importance too of encouraging the students' own efforts to master the necessary language skills for his particular purposes and so more skill or activity based courses where more attention is given to the skills or strategies involved in the learning process itself are developed, more learner-centred activities,

more self-access materials (like those developed by Michael Scott and Cecilia Ortiz in Monterrey), more active use of the learner's previously acquired knowledge and experience of his own subject and of the world at large. More attention to problem-solving, filling of information gaps, more information transfer type of exercises both from texts in English to notes in Spanish or what some call "recreation of information" changing from visual to written media for example - labelling diagrams, interpreting graphs and flow charts. All these things I believe are central to many ESP programmes and all of them are present in differing degrees in many of the courses and materials that have been produced here in Mexico (those produced by CELE, or UAM, Xochimilco or for ITESM and UANL in Monterrey - to name just a few I know reasonably well).

Well then are there things that seem different or particularly noticeable in ESP here in Mexico? I think there are in some respects if one compares for example with my own experience in Europe or with what I know of developments in some other Latin American countries - like Chile - I particularly notice the following:

First - of the various branches or options within the general pattern of ESP - work in Mexico has clearly so far, and for very good reasons, heavily concentrated on English for Academic Purposes and specifically on the area of Reading and Reading Comprehension courses for students studying a whole range of subjects other than English at tertiary level. In many ways some of the work done here in this area is as advanced as anywhere in the world and those engaged in this field should be congratulated on what they have achieved. I would, however, like to mention a few points in EAP that might deserve further attention. Firstly, concentrating on Reading and Reading Comprehension skills is very understandable in Mexico and does fit the most obvious and immediate needs for English of students working at tertiary level, but I am personally uncertain of the total validity of concentrating on reading to the almost virtual exclusion of the other macro skills - particularly those of speaking and writing. I can't go into detail as to why I feel this today except to suggest two studies done in different countries where the most immediate need identified was the same as here - but in both cases the course planners decided to spend at least some time in integrating improvement in reading skills (what is best called the perceptive skill I think) with some work in the other areas too. First the work of John Swales now at Aston University in England and previously in charge of the Service English Unit at Khartoum University in the Sudan. He says (and I tend to agree) "it does not necessarily follow from the fact that reading has been identified as being the greatest need that it should be assigned the largest proportion of language time. It does not follow

because it is equally important to consider what the language teacher can most usefully do in the limited time available to him. In other words, decisions about course priorities should be partly based on an assessment of the circumstances under which teacher intervention in the learning process is essential, where it is useful, and where it is of marginal advantage." (4) I think this is very well worth considering - taking into account dimensions other than skill priorities in setting up an ESP programme. One could put this another way as Chris Brumfit does and say "To specify, however accurately, target behaviour is not the same as to specify what needs to be taught."

The second piece of more recent research reported was carried out by Gabriella Castellanos de Valencia in the Universidad del Valle at Cali in Colombia and written up in the July 1980 edition of the magazine called "ESP del Valle". In fact this experiment was in setting up a type of ESP course surprisingly for the teaching of English to students of English Literature. One of her conclusions again concurs with one of my intuitive feelings about the danger of encapsulating, or putting too much emphasis in EAP courses on Reading Comprehension. Ms. Valencia argues that active and creative use of the language to express one's own meaning is actually an aid to reading comprehension, since putting one's own idea across leads to more indelible reinforcement than always working out somebody else's and therefore ultimately results in more efficient recognition in reading itself. Once again I think more research along these lines would be extremely worthwhile.

There is also another reason - again a piece of needs analysis research done at the Universidad del Valle - which underlines the fact that many university students if asked their views will often put speaking as the next most important skill after reading. In the Colombian study students ranked the skills in this order of importance: Reading, Speaking, Writing and finally Listening. The faculty staff members who were included in the survey saw the following order of priorities for their students: again Reading first, but then Listening, Writing and lastly Speaking! I have a feeling that what we are seeing in fact here is a split between what university staff (and this might often include ESP course planners too) tend to see as student needs and what students express more as their desires or wants. Ideally I think we have to try and accommodate both. Several teachers in Mexico City have recently told me that students say they would like spoken English classes as well as reading comprehension ones; ironically this is probably the result of the improved motivation through the setting up of Reading Comprehension classes. So tentatively shouldn't we consider and be flexible enough in our course planning to

incorporate both needs and wants (even demands), and perhaps future as well as immediate needs which will help students with possible future needs in writing in English (to contribute to professional journals) or in listening to international conferences, etc.

The second most striking observation in ESP in Mexico to me is that it is at present almost exclusively concentrated at tertiary level. This isn't of course peculiar to Mexico but some countries, Chile being a classic example, have already started introducing some ESP work in the final years of secondary schools. The researchers in the study I have already quoted at the Universidad del Valle in Colombia were right I believe to point out that a survey of needs expressed by tertiary level students "should have deep implications on the reorganization of foreign language teaching curricula at secondary level too." Lack of interest and motivation in English classes in secondary schools is often due to the vagueness of the long range objectives, and because of the uncertainty about the role of the foreign language in the general educational context. If as their survey found and ones done here and in lots of other countries suggests too, the need is for English for reading particularly at tertiary level, then surely it would be sensible to start things off at secondary level and in the preparatorias too. At present ESP is being used like a medicine to cure an illness once the illness has been diagnosed at tertiary level. What is now also needed (and here is the future relevance to those working at secondary level) is some preventive medicine approach too! If in the final years of English at secondary level some time was given to reading strategies, beginning to explore how to read English texts extensively and intensively, etc., then I believe student motivation would be improved and the task for students and teachers at tertiary level would also be lightened a little.

The next observation, which is really the corollary of the excellent work being done in EAP, is the relatively unexplored area of English for Occupational or Vocational Purposes. Mexico surely needs people to have training in English which they need in jobs in tourism, in banking and international trade, and in a variety of jobs as technicians - in the petrochemical industry, etc. - as well as for those who need English in their specialist academic studies. At present this area I think is surprisingly neglected in Mexico. Perhaps at present in Mexico university departments of languages are already overworked and have their hands full to keep up with ESP/EAP demands from within the universities themselves. If this is the case, then I think it has to be up to teachers in private institutes and binational centres to help

improve this area. What EOP is at present being done, in government agencies and so on, is frankly way behind what is being done in EAP; for the future of Mexico this is surely a great problem. EOP is strong in many European countries, it is definitely becoming strong in some other Latin American countries and it has to become stronger here soon too if it isn't going to produce a considerable hurdle in Mexico's own development.

There is one final observation on the present situation in ESP I'd like to make before coming to a few possible areas to look at with the future specifically in mind - in addition to what I have already tried to suggest in the areas of ESP at preparatoria and secundaria level and more work in EOP. At present, as with many things in Mexico, much of the expertise in ESP is concentrated in and around the capital. Yet there is an obvious and rapidly growing need for ESP development in the provinces. I personally know of ITR's and university departments from all over the country who acknowledge the need to set up programmes in their area, in their particular institution; some I know have already done so: Monterrey, Mérida, Xalapa, to name just a handful I have had personal contact with. I think the course planners and teachers in these and many other centres would admit they need a great deal of help. There is an enormous need for the knowledge of those working in the capital, in places like UNAM and UAM, to be able to be disseminated to the provinces. There is an urgent need for more seminars, more sharing of experiences, inter-institutional exchange, more pooling of materials, in teacher training and so on. That is, I think, the only way in which those working in the provinces can hope to cope with the demands being made on them. The demand, the market is already huge and the supply of expertise is as yet relatively small; somehow it has to be extended outwards.

There are three things I would like to ask you to consider in particular for the future in ESP in Mexico: 1) teacher training; 2) a standing back from a close look at the present materials writing, to perhaps consider a few options in addition to the excellent materials that have already been produced here; 3) the need for more research.

To begin with teacher training: if we are honest we have to admit that at present this is something of a disaster area, not by any means only in Mexico, it's also true I think sadly right through the EFL/ESP world. Just as most general EFL teacher training courses seem to be based on the assumption that they are training people to teach adults, while today in many countries and in specific ELT situations (including many in Mexico) teachers are obliged to spend at least a part of their time faced with the often very different world of teaching children and adolescents; the vast

majority of EFL teachers who attend pre-service training courses find they seem to be based on the assumption that they will be teaching general English classes and then later (rarely with any further training in between) they are plunged into intimate involvement with ESP programmes.

As I said earlier, I don't believe and don't want to give the impression that ESP is something isolated or radically different from the rest of the world of EFL teaching; yet I do feel that some attention to, some exposure to the basic elements and emphases of an ESP approach (preferably before teachers are launched into the firing line) would be enormously beneficial to them and of course equally vital ultimately to the poor students who will be on the receiving end.

Considering the tremendous growth of interest in ESP in the past decade it is extraordinary that there has been no parallel development in the area of pre-service training to prepare people for the realities they will face when they become practitioners in the field. There are very few training courses of any kind or at any level, whether they are MA courses in Applied Linguistics in Britain or the States, or in courses set up to focus on the specific learning and teaching needs in a particular country, that give more than very scant attention to any of the changes of emphasis and approach that ESP courses do in fact demand of the teacher. In fact the only courses that I know of that really try to attack this problem carefully and systematically are the ones set up some years ago under the guidance of Jack Ewer at the English Department in the University of Santiago, Chile, and one at Mahul University in Iraq, where there is an MA/ESP course for teachers. There isn't time to go into any of the details of these very interesting programmes, but I do think it is worth spending a few minutes looking at what Jack Ewer - I believe rightly - says are likely to be problems for someone coming to ESP programmes from the sort of arts background and general English preparation that most EFL teachers tend to have - including myself.

I think all the factors he mentions are most relevant to the future success of ESP programmes in Mexico because, however good the materials and however carefully the courses are designed, the whole thing will break down whenever contact with a teacher is required unless we have adequately prepared teachers to carry them out.

Very quickly I can pick out 2 or 3 of the most important of Ewer's factors of potential difficulty. Firstly the attitudinal one - as most EFL teachers themselves come from arts and humanities backgrounds, ignorance of science and technology - probably the commonest background areas

for ESP courses - certainly in Mexico - means that teachers tend to be afraid of or distrust the specialist subject areas of their students; students will of course quickly recognise this bias, barriers will be set up and rapidly this distrust can become counterproductive. Secondly what he calls the conceptual problem - clearly this is very closely linked with the first one as most EFL teachers conceptual knowledge of science is again likely to be inadequate for their future ESP teaching needs. Surely potential and practising ESP teachers need to have as part of their professional 'equipment' a general working knowledge of at least the key basic concepts of science. They should be helped in teacher training courses by being asked to read some general books in this area, watching and discussing general science films like those produced by UNESCO and the Open University, perhaps also visiting laboratories, factories and so on - all as part of the orientation process side of their training. Some problems may well arise too in the linguistic field. Very often in my experience, specialist lexical areas, particularly in technical and sub-technical vocabulary, present a greater future learning problem for the teacher than they ever do for the student. So that some exposure to the basic concepts and the 'core-language' of English for science and technology would seem to me to be essential components to build into any teacher training course which has as one of its aims to help train teachers who will probably work in the field of ESP. Lastly on training, ESP teachers will have to be more flexible, be able to take more initiatives, often be actively involved in materials production and certainly not able to hide behind the protective covers of a course book. They will often be far more answerable to their students who will rightly expect measurable results in restricted time frames - rather different from many general EFL teaching situations where time seems almost limitless and there is a pretty low efficiency expectation enjoyed by the teacher. "---the greater attention to the needs of the learner ineluctably requires greater sensitivity and understanding, broader technical, pedagogical capability and thus a more comprehensive background of teaching and experience, on the part of the teacher." (5)

Next I'd like to pick up something that Charles Alderson who used to work at CELE and is now back at Lancaster University in England said in a recent article on materials writing. He asked the question "Why in so many language teaching operations throughout the world, are materials production operations set up? When more and more language teaching materials are being published it seems paradoxical that at the same time there has been a growth in projects which have been established with the express purpose of designing materials for given situations." (6)

I suppose the answer is at least partially that materials design projects increase as teachers realize the inadequacy of published materials to meet their own particular need. However, as Alderson says this assumes two prior conditions (a) that the user knows what the student's needs really are, and (b) that some proper evaluation of published materials has taken place to establish their inadequacy to meet the identified needs.

I am sure in Mexico that in some cases both a needs analysis and an evaluation of published materials has been done before locally directed materials writing projects began. This is fine, but perhaps two other things would be worth considering for those of you who haven't yet begun projects but realise you will have to set up or will be engaged in ESP projects in the future. Firstly I suggest to those of you, particularly working in the provinces, often rather isolated from the work going on in the capital once you have carried out the essential needs analysis it is perhaps worth looking very carefully at some of the more recently published ESP material. Not because I expect they can often be adopted wholesale as the only component in your courses, but it may be far more practical and feasible for you to adapt them, add to them, etc., than start materials writing projects of your own from square one. The latter process involves a great deal of time and assumes you have the necessary expertise to carry out what is by no means an easy task.

Secondly, and this related to what I said earlier about teacher training, my feeling is that however hard you try to keep up in the next few years in Mexico, student demand for ESP is going to far outstrip teacher supply. Wouldn't it then be sensible to look very carefully at developing some more materials which were of the self-access kind where students could largely work on their own and where teacher contact hours were greatly reduced. That may seem to be anathema to some of you but I suggest it might be a practical help to what I foresee as becoming a major problem; far more demand for ESP courses and far too few teachers to be able to teach them if they revolve around normal classroom contact hours.

The last area I will mention briefly is the thorny one of research. I don't mean research in the sense of pure academic research but what some call 'operational research', or 'on-line research' ⁽⁷⁾ (to use Professor John Sinclair's term) or what some of my colleagues in the British Council refer to as ELT's need for "wind-tunnel experiments" ⁽⁸⁾ before products are launched on the market. This sort of research, of course, involves time and therefore money; perhaps why relatively little has been done in ELT, as the purse string-holders still have the mistaken belief that language teaching is all and only about the hours teachers spend in classrooms with a group of students. Clearly this is not the case and I hope more work like that written up in the excellent Reports of the Research and Development Unit at CELE between 1975-78 will be carried out here in

the next few years. I'd like to end by suggesting a few areas of research in ESP that I think could be of particular benefit: first, perhaps most importantly, EVALUATION. By this I don't mean the narrow field of testing but just as many people when asked what they think ESP essentially involves say 'the language of science and technology' so many people when asked about evaluation start with the words 'tests', or 'testing'. Well I have wider references in mind, I'm thinking of the need to find workable frameworks for evaluating ESP materials, something I think we will all need as more materials are produced and more specific ESP demands and situations manifest themselves. Next I think we need to research ways of evaluating methodologies more objectively, more empirically so that we begin to understand where, how and why a particular learning strategy is helped or hindered by particular methodological approaches. Also we need to be able to find ways of appraising (and here we are nearer I suppose to testing in concept) whether a student is better able to read articles or extract information from passages in English as a result of ESP Reading courses he has undertaken. We need ways of measuring something beyond the type of purely reading comprehension tests which normally look at lexical items - 'explain the meaning of the following words' - or multiple choice questions, or blank filling or cloze tests or even True/False types - all are useful up to a point. But to go back to a phrase I used earlier - we need to be able to evaluate understanding more accurately of 'discourse units' - how reference and logical connectors work and what strategies best help students to decode units longer than the sentence.

The second area which I think we could profitably explore further would be far more applications of self-access materials and student centred learning situations, perhaps along the lines of the exciting work done by CRAPEL at Nancy in France. (9) We need also I think to explore much more fully the possibilities of team-teaching in ESP - how best to draw upon the combined expertise of the subject specialist and the ESP teacher so that the combination is mutually beneficial to both and to the whole area of ESP teaching.

Finally, I think we desperately need to do a careful and comprehensive survey of ESP as it is being carried out throughout Mexico now. We need to know how many departments are involved, what specialist areas, skill needs, etc. are being served, where the gaps are, where there is need for further exploration and so on. I hope very much that through the combined efforts of the British Council, Mextesol, the newly formed AMLEX Society and a number of individuals in key positions in language departments throughout the country we can together build up a body of information on which sensibly to base ESP developments in the future in Mexico.

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