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A Personal Perspective of an ESP Teacher's Professional Development

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An ESP teachers' professional development is discussed as a personal process of learning, which can start at any time in one's career. It involves the rethinking, refocusing and re-strategising of one's teaching approaches and materials that must take into account the communicative language needs and skills of new jobs and emerging workplaces. The learning process recommended is not new to ESP but requires the teachers to renegotiate collaborative teaching principles that will ensure a position of synchronous partnership between the ESP teacher and content specialist. It also purports that some period of immersion in the specialist workplace would foster both confidence and competency in the discursive practices of the specialist profession.

Introduction

This paper is an account of an ESP teacher's personal learning experience while working as an English Language writer at Universiti Teknologi MARA's corporate office for a period of two years. The experience has injected realism in her thinking that enables her to refocus and re-strategise her ESP teaching approaches and materials. She hopes to share some of her thoughts about certain aspects of this personal and professional development with others who may find themselves in a similar situation. These include not only the ESP students and teachers at tertiary level, but also those who are involved in the planning, designing and reviewing of ESP syllabi and the writing of teaching materials and books.

Of great concern to many of us are the challenges of change in the ESP teaching and learning environment, which are not only affecting every language teaching institution in the country, but also costing the ESP teachers and practitioners their disciplinary identity and academic credentials. These changes are the outcomes of the creation of new world economies and communities, which consequently leads to new

jobs and emerging workplaces. The new environment requires teaching institutions to remodel and repackage their existing ESP curriculum that will provide answers to these new requirements in the workplace.

As we get swept into the wave of change, we need to be realistic and honest in fitting old and used teaching approaches and materials when preparing our graduates to be relevant and employable. We must also react fast to these demands as many new jobs require new communicative skills and language needs.

Although the discussion in this paper centres on an account of my personal experience, it will try to relate some aspects of my personal and professional development that justifies the paper's recommendation of a preferred ESP teaching approach. This paper will therefore 1) relate my personal experience 2) revisit professional discourse 3) reestablish the ESP teacher's credibility and 4) renegotiate collaborative teaching.

Personal Experience

The discussion begins with my working experience in the university's Office of Corporate Communications and International Relations and the changes in my reaction to the workplace. In general, the immersion into a "new working environment" has revolutionised my perception of second language teaching and learning, in particular that of ESP, and my attitude towards lifelong learning and professional development.

All these years I have considered myself to be a very competent English Language speaker having had an education in the English medium, a strong English Literature background, expertise in discourse studies of the cross-cultural kind, vast experience in teaching ESL and ESP to tertiary students (30 years to be exact), and training potential ESL teachers. At one point in the late 90s, I also led a group of lecturers in the Academy of Language Studies of UiTM in designing a series of English for Occupational (EOP) courses that generally aims to equip students with the necessary language skills to function at the workplace.

However, none of these diverse experiences matches the amount of specialist knowledge that I actually acquired over a period of two years while engaged in corporate work. It was an experience that made me realise how unfair I had been all these years to assume what ESP courses should be like or what skills and language ESP learners need to have to be successful communicators at the workplace. Even an attempt at finding

out corporate employees' language needs through a needs analysis seems futile.

At this point I need to give a list of some of the corporate writing responsibilities. They included the writing of prospectuses, brochures, press ads, newspaper write-ups, bulletins, coffee table and year books, editorials, translations and speeches for the university's top management personnel. The initial reaction towards the strange workplace and the work was overwhelmed with negativity. I was inadequate as I lacked content knowledge about corporate affairs but at the same time I was a reluctant learner as I was too comfortable in doing the things that I know best. Also, I constantly felt alienated by the strange territory, which was outside the boundary of my experience.

However, a quick reading of available corporate publications and on the spot analysis of the conventions involved transformed negative thoughts and feelings into positive ones, while work then gained an interesting and enlightening tempo. I became more confident of the specialist discourse and the discursive practices of the profession as I believe I was actually doing what Mansfield (1993) refers to as "real-world writing". There was always a real reason for writing and I was constantly motivated by the presence of a real audience. I have to admit that for many years that I spent preparing writing tasks for the students it never dawned on me that I had given my writing course students endless artificial tasks that had very little communicative value. This was because I had not given them any real reason to write and no real audience to refer to. I now understand that having to write to the same old teacher is certainly not a motivating factor in the learning process. More importantly, the hands-on experience has made me competent in the corporate discourse and has largely attributed to a renewed feeling of self-esteem and confidence as an ESP practitioner.

So, what are some of the things that I discovered that have contributed to my new perspective of ESP teaching and learning?

1. that ESP knowledge is dynamic not static;
2. that knowledge of specialist discourse, especially its content is essential for the ESP teacher, course designer and materials writer;
3. that knowledge of the specialist code develops a sensitivity towards the communicative goals and functions of the discourse;
4. that existing knowledge of conventions of language use (i.e. linguistic competence) is an advantage in acquiring content knowledge;

5. that an ESP teacher needs to have linguistic competence and competence in the specialist discourse (i.e. professional competence) (Selinker, 1979); and
6. that specialist discourse competence can be acquired during a period of involvement in the workplace

Professional Discourse

For the purpose of this discussion a closer look at professional discourse is essential and recommended in order to get an insight into the developments within ESP. I refer to Jordan's (1997: 3) figure on the different branches of ESP for a clearer representation of professional discourse in relation to the bigger picture of ESP. Corporate discourse or specialist discourse in general comes under the label English for Professional Purposes (EPP) and is synonymous with English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) and English for Vocational Purposes (EVP). Under this label, Jordan listed some professions, which we could easily add on to, especially considering the wide range of jobs that new world technologies and economies have created in our communities.

ESP is not a "monolithic universal phenomenon" (Hutchinson, T. and Alan Waters, 1987) and since its early beginnings in the 60s it has undergone several phases of development, which can be tied closely to the changing needs of language use, new trends in linguistics and learner attitudes towards learning. Interestingly, ESP has developed at different speeds in different countries and also in different institutions within the country. For example, the development of ESP in UiTM is very much affected by the fact that the university is one of the largest in Malaysia, which currently offers more than a total of 250 professional programmes. As such, any revision to the ESP syllabi can only be implemented after careful planning and research, which means a longer response period to any change in the discipline.

The diversity in professional courses also means that there are more discourse communities, new content knowledge and language to consider in the design and teaching of EPP courses in the university. To begin with, many ESP teachers often find themselves having to cope with content or subject matter outside their experience. In addition, many feel inadequate and are "reluctant settlers in the new territory" (Hutchinson, T. and Alan Waters, 1987). This is especially the case when ESP teachers make little effort to retrain. No doubt subject teachers too contribute to

this alienation and hostility for reasons, which in a lot of cases are valid. However, this discussion will not go into the details of these factors. This situation of course cannot be generalised to other local institutions of learning in the country.

On the other hand, there are also many teachers who are effective EPP practitioners and are well versed in the requirements of the various disciplines or content courses and actually understand the discursive practices of these professions. To be well versed in Bhatia's (1997: 136-138) sense is to: 1) understand the specialist code; 2) acquire genre or discourse knowledge; 3) be sensitive to cognitive structuring of specialist discourse, and 4) manipulate genre or discourse knowledge for novel situations.

1. Bhatia refers to knowledge of the specialist code as a pre-requisite to developing communicative expertise in the specialist discourse, unlike that needed for general every day use of the language. According to Bhatia (1997: 137), during the last two decades work done in discourse and genre analysis strongly suggests that there are indeed "fundamental differences in the lexico-grammatical, semantico-pragmatic and discoursal resources in specialist discourses". What this means is that the context of discourse requires the seemingly 'ordinary' kind of words and structures often found in other contexts to have specific values relevant only to professional discourse.

2. The second pre-requisite to becoming informed users of specialist discourse is that the EPP teachers must acquire knowledge of appropriate rhetorical procedures and conventions that are typical of the specialist discourse community. It involves knowing not only the communicative goals of a particular discourse community, but also the communicative goal-oriented purposes associated with the specific use of discourse types. Bhatia (1997: 146) illustrates how a complex legal text can undergo two processes of a) "easification" and b) "simplification" so that it can be read and processed easily without losing its generic integrity. Easification is a device used to clarify complex legal expressions without changing meaning and at the same time reduces the information load at particular points in legislative statements. Simplification, on the other hand, involves creating alternative textualisations meant for a non-legal reader.

3. Thirdly, to be well versed also means that the EPP teacher needs to become familiar with how language is typically used to achieve

communicative goals and purposes. They are also expected to be sensitive to the changes that novel situations can have on specialist meanings and forms of specialist language.

4. And finally, the EPP teacher needs to be quite an expert at manipulating specialist discourse conventions to achieve pragmatic and communicative success in specified professional contexts.

The ESP Teacher's Credibility

I will begin this section by referring to the statement I made at the start of this discussion – that changes in the ESP teaching and learning environment affect the accountability of ESP teachers in that they seem to be losing their footing in their very own profession. We also seem to be playing a subservient role in the professional world and allow ourselves to be consumed by other "more" central professions. This is because these specialists and content teachers have ownership of their disciplines and although language is the main vehicle used for communicating meaning, language experts somehow have to contend with being at the periphery of most disciplines. Our role is secondary to content teachers and in the worst of pedagogical scenarios, we are also of secondary importance – bad slots in the timetable, low priority listing for professional development and training, low budget allocations, poor promotional chances - and are very often of no added value to an organisation.

So what do we do about this failing image? In the spirit of embracing the challenges of the ESP profession and in our effort to be accountable to the students, an attitude of indifference is not the preferred approach. There are two types of remedial measures that can be taken, one involving the ESP teacher or groups of them that do not have too much of a rippling effect on other factors like the syllabi and the curriculum, while the second approach requires the effort of many individuals like administrators, syllabus designers, materials writers and others for a more wholesome change to happen to the ESP teaching and learning environment.

It is my contention that starting at the individual level is the logical step towards self-improvement. It is also my belief that one has to make a choice of only one specialist area in which to develop a "socially meaningful role" (Gee, 1990: 143) to play. This means an ESP teacher should specialise by learning common ways of "using language, of thinking,

feeling, believing, valuing, and of acting" in one particular professional community (Gee, 1990: 143). I would like to refer to my own experience of learning to be a corporate discourse specialist where at a certain point in the learning curve I was able and confident to speak, think, and act like a corporate person, and could recognise others when they do so.

According to Murray (1998), acquiring a new discourse is to "become able to take on a new social identity – one of a number – and a new view of the world and the things that are important in it". Seeing that acquiring a new social identity cannot be done overnight, ESP teachers are therefore encouraged to concentrate only on one specialist area at a time and perhaps a good start could be the discipline that one has been assigned to teach ESP courses over a period of time. The choice of a specialist discourse could also depend on one's personal interest and proximity to the environment.

A total immersion in the new discourse over a period of time is the best that can happen to the new specialist discourse learner, as I have personally experienced in the corporate office. However, a partial presence in the new environment is also beneficial as the learner now has a chance to be a part of the existing social network. Being a friend means being able to source first hand information from content teachers and students and also from available materials and reading texts within the premises. It is therefore important that the ESP teacher assumes the role of a learner in the discipline that she or he wishes to develop competency in. It is in the light of this need that a renegotiation of collaborative teaching is recommended for the practicing ESP teacher.

Renegotiation of Collaborative Teaching

The last segment of this discussion looks again at collaborative teaching in brief in an effort to maximise the role of the ESP teacher in the present context of specialist discourse. We refer to Barron's (2002) explanation of collaboration as opposed to co-operation as the start to our understanding of the meaning of collaborative teaching. The prevailing view of collaboration in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) is one of a continuum, "from low interaction between teachers, i.e. co-operation, to high interaction, i.e. team teaching". The concept of team teaching in Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998: 42-48) sees the teacher as the main information seeker of subject knowledge, "asking questions and gathering information about the students' subject course" that involves "formative

negotiations" between two teachers. To a great extent, this role reinforces the secondary position taken by ESP teachers in relation to content teachers and thus contributes to their declining status in the professional world.

This paper therefore takes Gray's definition of collaboration as its central focus:

a process through which parties who see different aspects of a problem can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited version of what is possible (Gray, 1989: 5)

Gray further elaborates how each of the two parties brings together "different sets of knowledge" and "different ways of knowing how to go about the problem" (Barron, 2002) in accordance to five principles (Gray, 1989:11) listed below:

- the parties are interdependent
- solutions emerge by dealing with differences constructively
- joint ownership of decisions
- collective responsibility for the future direction of the problem domain by the parties
- collaboration is an emergent process

Ideally, this is the relationship that is most conducive to the ESP teacher – a synchronous discourse existence among content specialists over a certain period of learning in order to develop competency in the chosen discourse. Such an outcome is possible and requires the ESP teacher to renegotiate collaborative teaching not to mean team teaching but instead a continuous inquiry into the specialist discourse through some programme of immersion.

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