Teaching Language for Specific Purposes

Laura E. Ho

We are witnessing a tremendous increase in the demand for special English programming. Most teachers, however, are trained as language specialists and few of us have the background to cope with technical vocabulary and concepts in great detail. This article addresses the fundamental need for language development in special English contexts and offers practical suggestions for the development of specific materials.

Have you felt a need for trades specific English courses in your programme? Many communities are now considering a response to pre-employment language needs as well as language training in the workplace. This paper will address some considerations for the design and implementation of such a programme.

THINKING ABOUT TEACHING ESP

There is ongoing argument on the topic of who is qualified to teach special English. Do we need tradespeople who can teach English, or can English teachers learn to do the job? Clearly, many tradespeople do not have the training to teach English, nor would many of them settle for the

salaries or working conditions which many teachers face. This becomes even more apparent when students are engineers or architects! So how can English teachers gain enough specific technical background to do the job adequately?

I think that a primary consideration must be that we are not *training* people to be mechanics, electricians, draftsmen, but rather we are helping tradespeople to communicate about their work in English, and to understand our work systems and conventions. If this is the case, the ESP teacher's job is not unlike that of the regular ESL teacher. In ESL, we try to get students to communicate about their lives and experiences in English. We teach students to successfully integrate, both socially and vocationally.

Keeping in mind this distinction, training vs. language teaching, we must then look toward a suitable format for our teaching. The following considerations are among those requiring examination:

1. Are students of a similar level, or is there wide divergence in language abilities?

Because students share a common interest, work, it may be easier to teach mixed levels in an ESP class than in a regular ESL class. Of course, having mixed levels will mean preparing for some individualized learning. This topic will be discussed later in this paper.

2. Were all students "qualified" in their own country, or were some still training, assistants or hobbyists?

This must be taken into consideration, particularly in discussing qualification for Canadian credentials. Some students may be interested in registering in technical schools while others will want to enter the work force directly. Consult your local Apprenticeship Board regarding procedures for entering training schools and the possibility of challenging the journeyman's examinations. In Alberta, for example, it is even possible to write the journeyman's examination with the assistance of an interpreter.

3. Where can you find appropriate background information to provide you with technical reading and course material?

(a) Look in your school library, particularly, in the "Careers" section of the library.

(b) Consult your provincial Apprenticeship Board for:
   i) speakers on apprenticeship and requalification;
   ii) manuals outlining the course studies for each apprenticeship area;
   iii) exact information about trade regulations;
   iv) questions about specific student cases;
   v) brochures outlining the apprenticeship route and trades requir-

ing apprenticeship.

(c) If you have a technical school near you, make contact with instructors in relevant trade areas. Investigate the possibility of a tour or a talk. Research the trade area in their library but *don't* get bogged down with the terminology. Remember that the first task is to teach English and that you are working to establish a *framework* in which to accomplish that task.

(d) Find out if any other people have been involved in teaching a similar course. Talk to them about the work and their sources of information, if possible.

(e) Consult professional readings on the topic of teaching ESP. A bibliography of readings is included at the end of this paper.

(f) Establish community contacts. Try to locate tradespeople or professionals in your community who might be interested in having students visit their office/shop. This is especially valuable if you have a mixed group with individuals from related occupations.

4. Are all the students in the same occupation, or do they work in several related trades (e.g., motor mechanic, machinist, heavy duty mechanics, partsman)?

It is fairly straightforward to work with a group of tradespeople from related areas, but initial consideration must be given to determining exactly which trade each student has worked in. Sometimes students are unable to convey exactly what it was that they did in their country. Other times, there may be no exact equivalent for the job they have worked at. You may need to use interpreters to unravel some of these details, but it is important to do so *before* you start to teach, if possible.

If you are working with students from related trades, some individualization will be necessary. This can be accomplished through the use of learning packages (discussed later in this paper) and Trade Manuals (see Bibliography).

DECIDING WHAT TO TEACH

Already discussed is the ongoing concern with terminology and technical concepts. If we can continue to keep in mind the essential distinction, that we teach the language, not the job, we create a focus for our task. We must then ask ourselves, "Apart from technical qualifications, what are the activities/functions/situations that people must cope with to do their jobs?"

By examining the language tasks expected on the job, we can develop a framework or breakdown for a course. Here are some of the tasks which I

have identified for auto mechanics and related trades:

1. Receiving instructions for work assignments
2. Using the telephone
   - discussing problems with customers
   - booking appointments
   - ordering parts
3. Completing work orders and bills
4. Communicating with co-workers
   - about work
   - socially (coffee breaks, on the job, after work)
5. Communicating with customers
6. Communicating with management
7. Reading
   - manuals
   - insurance and other forms
8. Understanding
   - Canadian equivalencies and customs (buying own tools, unions, etc.)
   - workers' rights (overtime, workers' compensation, unemployment insurance, etc.)

The actual work of the mechanic, the hands on labour, does not involve much spoken or written language. Mechanics are expected to know and be able to talk about engines and work which they are performing. Much of this language is pure vocabulary, working with direct equivalencies of concepts learned in the first language, and it can be learned largely through self-study and individualized learning packages.

PHILOSOPHY OF APPROACH

I have found it valuable to spend some time during the first lesson introducing and talking about the philosophy of the class and this approach. Particularly in the trades areas, some men find it difficult to accept a woman as a teacher. It also takes some time to grapple with the fact that the teacher is not a tradesperson but an English teacher. There are many questions to be answered.

My introduction always begins by addressing these concerns, and by stressing that students are already prepared with content. They need only learn a new language vehicle to make use of that content. Content and form of the course are also discussed as well as individual and group goals.

TECHNIQUE AND ESP

Little has been written about methodology for ESP, yet the practical aspects of such a programme are generally what concern teachers the most. Hutchinson and Waters (Note 1) have provided a model for the development of ESP lessons and materials (see Figure 1). I have found it a useful format for the organization of thought.

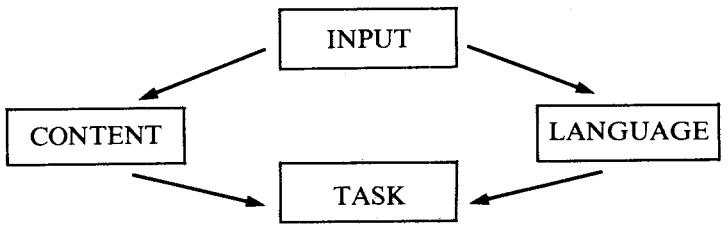

Figure 1. Model for the design of ESP lessons and materials.

The diagram helps us to organize lesson planning. We begin with an input or stimulus (text, visual, real object), and assess it for language and content potential. Our goal is to complete a *task* (problem or other job) by combining both language and content skills. In this way, students whose prime motivation is generally the content are channeled to communicate that content in terms of newly learned language skills.

Waters and Hutchinson have spent considerable time addressing the question of materials development. It is important to be selective in choosing from a wide variety of commercially prepared ESP materials currently available, as many are organized, not from a language point of view, but in terms of content. Waters and Hutchinson (Note 2) suggest that:

> Source material should be taken from all the different media to which the native speaker student will have been exposed by virtue of his education and of living within a Western society. Some very fruitful sources are:
>
> Television documentaries (including schools programmes);
> Popular science books (e.g., *The Penguin Book of the Physical World*);
> Children's science books (e.g., Ladybird Books);
> Do-it-yourself books, leaflets and advertisements;
> Information issued by the nationalized industries and large manufacturers of consumer goods;
> School science courses (e.g., The Nuffield Science Project).

> The use of this kind of material, in addition to its theoretical justification, has distinct practical advantages. Firstly, source material is readily available in the consumer-oriented media. This offers not only a greater variety of texts, but also makes project work much easier. Secondly, since the topics are non-specific, the EFL teacher should be able to handle them easily (in terms of their information content—and, of course, linguistically). Thirdly, in group work every member should be able to make a useful contribution.

This recommendation bears examination both from the point of view of seeking suitable materials and in terms of budget constraints. Lesson content is still a matter of search and adaptation. Individualized learning packages may offer one way of organizing this information.

INDIVIDUALIZED LEARNING PACKAGES

Especially with the large amounts of technical vocabulary and concepts to be learned in any ESP course, the use of individualized learning packages is one way of offering content specific programming to complement classroom instruction. In a classroom where related tradesmen may be studying, learning packages can provide content specific to each student's exact trade. Learning packages might also free the teacher to work with individual students.

Constructing a Learning Package

A learning package can address any specific and repeated need for information expressed by students; for example, basic Apprenticeship and Requalification information. Pamphlets and simplified reading materials as well as support materials could be included. This specific package might also direct the student to an office such as the Apprenticeship Branch and instruct him to report about his findings.

Another type of learning package might address a specific vocabulary aspect of a trade. Oral reinforcement could be included through the use of language master cards or a prerecorded cassette. Follow-up exercises could possibly take the form of a labelling activity and some problem solving.

In a learning package on the Cooling System, we might begin with a series of ten to fifteen word or phrase language master cards. Students could be asked to submit their recorded cards for the teacher's review. They may then be asked to label a blank diagram of the Cooling System provided in the package. For basic level students, this may be as much

independent work as we can expect. For more advanced students, sample problems can be added, involving reading, writing and oral skills. Students working on problem solving could also be encouraged to use reference books to provide information.

Structuring Oral Activities

Oral activities relate to the use of language to get the job done. Referring again to the unit on Apprenticeship and Requalification, if we consider that we are working with a learning package, what classroom work can we develop to complement it? In enquiring about certification, a student may be asked to talk about his past experience and to describe his various jobs. Presenting this information in cohesive oral form would be a reasonable goal for students. In fact, this particular task is quite large. It would probably take several lessons of review and building before students achieve even minimal mastery.

Here are further suggestions for oral activities:

(a) functional dialogues;
(b) sequencing activities;
(c) questioning (oral problem solving);
(d) giving instructions, directions, locations;
(e) description of appearance, condition, classification;
(f) social gambits (with a good dose of realism!).

CONCLUSIONS

The teaching of English for Specific Purposes requires the same types of skills as does regular ESL teaching plus a little research and imagination. As a reward, the area offers the carrot of content which so many intermediate and advanced level ESL teachers presently seek. As well, it provides ESL with a link to the larger educational areas of academic and vocational training, a link which, if pursued, can only have positive ramifications for our students and our programmes.

NOTES

1. Hutchinson, Tom & Waters, Alan. *The structure of a teaching unit.* Unpublished paper, TESOL Convention 1982. (Available from Tom Hutchison, University of Lancaster, England)
2. Hutchinson, Tom & Waters, Alan. *Implications for materials and methodology.* Unpublished paper, TESOL Convention 1982. (Available from Tom Hutchison, University of Lancaster, England)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Basic electricity. Silver Spring, MD: Institute of Modern Languages, 1975.

Beardwood, Lynette. *A first course in technical English* (2 Vols.). London: Heineman, 1978.

Canada Employment and Immigration Commission. *Occupational analyses series.* Ottawa: Employment and Immigration Canada.

Titles in the *Occupational analyses series:*

Boilermaker
Cook
Electric mechanic
Farm Equipment mechanic
Hairstyling and barbering
Heating (gas and oil); servicer, commercial and industrial
Heavy duty equipment mechanic
Industrial instrument mechanic
Industrial mechanic (millwright)
Interior wall and ceiling finisher
Ironworker
Lineman
Machinist
Major electrical appliance repairman
Motor vehicle body repair
Motor vehicle mechanic
Oil burner mechanic
Painter and decorator
Plumber
Power engineer
Radio and television service technician
Refrigeration and air-conditioning mechanic
Steamfitter - pipefitter
Welder

Costinett, Sandra. *The language of accounting in English.* New York: Regents, 1977.

Dresner, Joanne & Beck, Kenneth. *It's up to you: Language skills and strategies for getting a job.* New York: Longman, 1980.

Drobnic, Karl. *Sci tech: Reading and writing the English of science and technology.* Culver City, CA: ELS Publications, 1981.

Elrick, Thomas F. *Forms in your life.* Toronto: Globe/Modern Curriculum Press, 1976.

Holden, Susan (Ed.). *English for specific purposes.* London: Modern English Publications Ltd., 1977.

Jupp, Thomas Cyprian. *Industrial English: An example of theory and practice in functional language teaching for elementary learners.* London: Heinemann, 1975.

Knowles, Phillip L. *Fluency squares: For business and technology.* New York: Regents, 1981.

Methold, K. & Waters, D. *Understanding technical English* (Books 1-3). London: Longman, 1973.

Practical English for tradesmen and apprentices. Edmonton: Edmonton Catholic Schools, 1979.

Titles in the *Practical English for tradesmen and apprentices series:*

Automotives
Carpentry
Electricity
Plumbing
Sheet Metal

Selinker, Larry. *Working papers in English for science and technology.* Seattle: University of Washington, 1974.

Trimble, Mary Todd & Drobnic, Karl (Eds.). *English for specific purposes: Science and technology.* Eugene, OR: Oregon State University, 1978.

Wiggin, Barbara M. *Syntax and discourse analysis: An approach to the teaching of scientific English.* University of Hawaii, 1977.

THE AUTHOR

Laura Ho has taught ESL in both Alberta and British Columbia and has been involved with teacher and tutor training for several years as an ESL resource person at the Alberta Vocational Centre, Edmonton. She has been active in looking at ESL applications for new technologies such as laser disk and in alternate modes of delivery for ESL instruction. She is a founding member and past president of the Alberta Association ATESL, and past president of TESL Canada.