



Towards Postmethod ESP and EAP Teaching

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Abstract

English language teaching (ELT) has moved from an overreliance on rigid methods to an adaptive and dynamic postmethod era [1]. This conceptual paper attempts to demonstrate this shift's consequences for English for specific purposes (ESP) and English for academic purposes (EAP) teaching. ESP and EAP have been characterised by a focus on students' content areas and are thus predestinated for an inclusive, open, and versatile instructional approach. Postmethod ESP/EAP teaching is freed from a dogmatic stance and rests on teacher investigation of classroom complexities [2]. It is thus further linked with complexity theory [3] as a foundation of taking learner realities into consideration when preparing, conducting, and revising units and courses. This postmethod angle means that ESP/EAP teaching today is continuously being expanded, refined, and renewed for the benefit of its stakeholders. In other words, it aims at encompassing the diversity of contexts and realities that teachers and learners face in 21st-century postpandemic classrooms around the world.

Keywords: *ESP, EAP, postmethod ELT, higher education, complexity, culture*

1. Introduction

Teaching English for specific and academic purposes (ESP/EAP) in higher education is a vibrant subject area that requires flexibility, creativity, and open-mindedness on the part of instructors. It is a field by definition rooted in both English language teaching (ELT) and the content disciplines of its learners, as these provide the cultural context for language learning. Teaching ESP and EAP in higher education is further informed by students' future professions and career fields as well as by the individual and institutional needs of its participants.

Conceptually, ESP and EAP are treated as two sides of the same coin in this paper to emphasise the similarities that these currents share in higher education. While ESP is oriented towards the professional workplace, EAP is centred on academia, but this distinction becomes less relevant to tertiary contexts because in many cases learners enrolled in content degree programmes who receive linguistic instruction are taught English both for their future careers and their present university studies. ESP/EAP is a subfield of English language teaching and learning, which again is a subfield of applied linguistics (AL). As such, it lies at the crossroads of theory and practice, research and methodology, and language and content. Regarding its participants (teachers and students), it occurs in four principal linguistic contexts: English as a native language (ENL), English as a second language (ESL), English as a foreign language (EFL), and English as a lingua franca (ELF) [4, 5].

Linguistically, traditional ELT fields like grammar, vocabulary, collocations, and semantics play a role in ESP/EAP, as do the four or six skills of ELT. The four skills of listening, reading, speaking, and writing were expanded to six in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), adding interaction and mediation to the primary receptive and productive skills [6]. Furthermore, pragmatics (the effect of context on meaning), sociolinguistics (the influence of society on language use), and discourse analysis (the study of spoken and written text) have contributed to the development and practice of ESP/EAP.

2. Foundations of Teaching Tertiary ESP and EAP

ESP/EAP in higher education has been informed and shaped by ELT pedagogy to the extent that it has emerged as a distinct educational domain. In principle, the ESP/EAP teaching concept proposed in this paper is communicative, dynamic, and adaptive. It subscribes to Holliday's appropriate methodology stance, which entails that teachers "take time to investigate what happens in the classroom" [7]. In that sense, it is also situated in the postmethod era of ELT [8, 9], freed from a rigid corset of formulaic directions that tended to characterise certain dogmatic methods in the 20th century. Kumaravadivelu has advocated the three pedagogical parameters of "particularity, practicality, and possibility" [10], meaning an attention to local contexts, a disruption of the theory-practice divide, and an empowerment of participants by tapping their sociocultural experiences.



ESP/EAP pedagogy is further set within larger educational and sociocultural systems, thus fully conforming to complexity theory [11, 12, 13] and attracting a corresponding methodology [14]. Similar to Kumaravadivelu [15, 16], Mercer has argued for a non-prescriptive stance in ELT [17].

Further pedagogical currents have influenced ESP/EAP more deeply and together may be said to epitomise the nature of ESP/EAP. These currents have proven valuable in the teaching practice of the author. They are both characteristic features of the field in a traditional sense and at the same time constituents of the author's particular context in a postmethod sense. From this postmethod angle, the terms *methodology*, *didactics*, and *pedagogy* with their variants are preferred to the word *method* here, as they carry broader meanings and better reflect the complexity of teaching.

2.1 The Lexical Approach

A key strand in ESP/EAP has been the lexical approach to various degrees [18, 19] with its related focus on teaching collocations [20, 21]. Collocations and chunks of language [22] are particularly prominent in technical terms of students' content disciplines, so that building exercises and activities around them is a meaningful way of blending language learning with disciplinary content. An adoption of the lexical approach, however, does not preclude the necessity of teaching grammar, as Lewis himself has underscored [23]. On the contrary, in foreign language environments, grammar remains essential to facilitate learning and language transfer from reception to production through rule-governed generalisations. Similarly, Wray reminds us that formulaic sequences in English "need to be subjected to control and guidance in delivery" [24]. A promising way forward in teaching grammar is Hoey's [25, 26] theory of lexical priming, which ties in neatly with the lexical approach. In short, lexical priming claims that human beings subconsciously note words in their linguistic and social contexts and are primed to use these pieces of language in the same contexts through repeated encounters. According to lexical priming, word partnerships are characterised by collocation (lexical relation), colligation (grammatical patterns), semantic associations, and pragmatic associations.

2.2 Content and Language

Another methodological current underlying tertiary ESP/EAP is integrating content and language in higher education (ICLHE) [27] in various forms. The content element in ESP/EAP is likely to engage students in language learning when their disciplinary, professional, and institutional orientations are reflected in the ELT classroom. This means that the content and language needs of learners are best catered for by means of initial and continuous needs analysis (see, e.g., [28]).

2.3 Task-based Language Teaching

Task-based language teaching [29] represents another cornerstone of tertiary ESP/EAP, as tasks facilitate the integration of content and language. Authentic tasks rooted in students' core disciplines may serve as vehicles for language learning goals [30], such as genre-based writing, scientific or technical communication, and academic register building.

2.4 Multimodality

An awareness and the due consideration of multimodality [31] in students' target professions further forms a key element of ESP/EAP in contrast to general English language teaching. Science and engineering students, for instance, need to produce text types based on previous work involving instruments, tools, electronic equipment, machines, and computers. Technical texts may also contain measurement data, analytical results, and graphical representations, which characterises them as multimodal genres. For ESP/EAP teachers, multimodality means that they need to devise language learning activities to practise the target use of multimodal features in professional communication.

2.5 Authenticity

Another methodological component in ESP/EAP teaching is its paramount concern for authenticity. This orientation towards students' professional and academic realities comprises authenticity of text and authenticity of purpose [32] as well as authenticity of interaction between a reader and a text [33, 34]. Authenticity, however, is not bound to the written code, as the previous paragraph has shown, but it comprises further communicative target events and related pedagogical interventions. It extends, therefore, to authenticity in tasks [35], assignments, and testing. This, however, also suggests that authenticity of professional target language use must remain an ideal in formal educational environments, which are always pedagogically motivated and thus no longer authentic. On the other hand, such formal educational environments themselves constitute real professional scenarios as in



the context of ELT. Thus, in ESP/EAP teaching, it is advisable to strive for authenticity with the awareness that enacting students' future professional reality will remain an unattainable goal in classrooms but can be meaningfully substituted by semi-authentic pedagogical alternatives.

2.6 Needs Analysis

All activities to identify learners' needs in programme, course, materials, or task design are part of needs analysis, another major strand in ESP/EAP [36, 37]. The scale of needs analyses ranges from complex investigations involving all stakeholders to single informal talks with students. According to Kumaravadivelu [38], such explorative teacher reflection lies at the heart of postmethod pedagogy and aims at a better understanding of local contexts and students. In higher education, this learner focus encompasses aspects like major disciplines studied, curricular contents, content course requirements and assignments, individual study goals, and target professions, but also broader characteristics such as age, gender, previous education, level of English, personal interests, and social affiliations.

2.7 Learner Autonomy

The ultimate goal of all teaching and hence also ESP/EAP must be to enable learners to perform independently of an instructor in target situations and professions. Learner autonomy [39, 40], therefore, represents a strong current underlying tertiary ESP/EAP. Learner autonomy, however, will be favoured and encouraged by teacher autonomy, which closes the cycle of teaching ESP/EAP in the postmethod era by means of teacher development and teacher research.

3. Conclusions

This paper has delineated a "teacher-generated theory of practice" [41] in tertiary ESP/EAP. This particular pedagogy is characterised by its postmethod orientation and a deep consideration of learners' content disciplines and future career fields. Consequently, it may be termed a postmethod ESP/EAP teaching theory of practice that is continuously being expanded, refined, and renewed. It is, therefore, no dogmatic method in the outdated meaning of the word but an open, adaptive, and interdisciplinary didactical concept that allows for the integration of educational currents, academic cultures, and sociocultural experiences of course participants.

Since teachers are not mere executors of their curriculum but drivers of the educational process, this expandable teaching concept is meant as a catalyst for similar endeavours in other tertiary settings. It is, thus, intended to inspire and encourage ESP/EAP professionals to further develop their own and their learners' particular educational experiences. As a postmethod-era teaching concept, it is innovative by definition because it strives for the evaluation, adaptation, and amelioration of existing didactical conditions and educational circumstances.

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