

ESP Projects, English as a global language, and the challenge of change

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Abstract

The article reviews a number of key ESP Projects over the last 40 years and makes some predictions for the future of ESP and its link with developments in transnational education. The author describes the political and economic conditions behind the spread of English as a global language which in turn are driving the development of ESP programmes and projects. He makes a plea for a greater awareness of the systemic contextual aspects of ESP programmes and believes that ESP Project implementation can be made more successful by applying aspects of educational innovation theory.

Keywords: EAP Projects, transnational education, English as a global language, language policy, educational innovation.

Resumen

Proyectos de IFE, inglés como lengua global y el desafío del cambio

El presente artículo examina diversos proyectos relacionados con el Inglés para Fines Específicos (IFE) desarrollados durante los últimos cuarenta años y hace algunas predicciones para el futuro de IFE y su conexión con los avances en la educación transnacional. El autor describe la situación política y económica que sustenta la propagación del inglés como lengua global que a su vez contribuye al desarrollo de programas y proyectos relacionados con el IFE. Asimismo demanda una mayor sensibilidad sobre los aspectos contextuales sistémicos de los programas de IFE y cree que la implantación de proyectos de IFE puede alcanzar un mayor éxito si se aplican modelos teóricos que guarden relación con la innovación educativa.

Palabras clave: proyectos de IFE, educación transnacional, inglés como lengua global, política lingüística, innovación educativa.

Introduction

I have been asked together with other contributors to this celebratory volume to add a few thoughts reflecting my experience in the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) field over the last 20 years or so. I am very happy and honoured to do so since a celebration of AELFE's 20th anniversary is entirely appropriate, but it also gives me the opportunity through *Ibérica* to look historically at ESP developments and gain a longer-term perspective on the ESP profession and its associated activities. A historical perspective is sadly lacking in ESP and ELT in general (notable exceptions are Dudley-Evans & St John, 2001; Howatt, 2004; Upton, 2012), but perhaps this volume will encourage others to look at ESP developments from a critical-historical view so that we can say ESP has come of age. Without history we remain "provincial in time" (Magee, 1998), and the profession is weaker as a result.

ESP and ELT

Although ESP has certain characteristics that are highlighted more than in "general" ELT (for instance, concepts such as "surrender value" and "specific" versus "general" language issues), we should not regard ESP as separate from ELT. ELT deals with the same questions as ESP, and although a number of issues are more salient in certain ESP contexts, many "differences" are more perceived than real (though nonetheless important for that) deriving from such political questions as professional identity and expertise. Furthermore both ESP and ELT are part of educational and indeed social processes, a fact which has been neglected in the past. Restrictions or concentrations of expertise that have been expressed through the designation of ESP as an area within its own right have their strengths of course. ESP can be a highly focused activity engaging specialisation that promotes positive change, but it can also result in a neglect of fundamental educational issues and a lack of awareness of educational innovation theory which can lead to a blinkered approach hampering the success of ESP programmes.

ESP and the socio-political background

So I wish in this article to develop the notion of ESP being part of broader concerns since I have found during my involvement with ESP that socio-

political concerns have proved crucial in the formulation and successful implementation of ESP programmes. These socio-political issues are connected to three aspects: 1) the spread of English as a global language; 2) language and language-in-education policy; and 3) curriculum innovation and change; which in their turn have influenced ESP research, teaching, and learning.

We have experienced over the last 30 years the spread of the market economy and political systems supporting that ideology, though it may be we are at the time of writing experiencing a crisis and a questioning of the wholesale acceptance of market economy philosophies (see Sandel (2012) as an example of an alternative view). Such economic and political systems and their pervasive effect on language and language programmes have also been contested in the work for example of Fairclough (2010), and Block, Gray and Holborow (2012) who explore the marketisation of education and the spread of neo-liberal ideologies.

Societies are also changing from highly structured rational systems to looser less stratified ones and are moving towards operations characterised by fuzziness and complexity, multiple identities, and criticality. These developments have influenced educational systems which have moved from structural to discourse-based approaches, from teacher control to learner individualism and autonomy, from transmission of knowledge to enquiry; and from book learning to new technologies (Kennedy, 2011). I shall return to these developments and their applicability to ESP later in this article.

Linked to such economic and political developments has been the trend towards globalisation characterised by a compression of time and space, rapid technological change, population mobility, the ignoring of national boundaries by business organisations, and, as a reaction against globalisation, a process of localisation and hybridisation, and new centres of action and expertise other than those traditionally located in the West. Such globalisation processes have resulted in changes in the status and use of English and especially in the spread of English as a global language (Kennedy, 2010). The spread of English raises a number of questions which affect ESP. Such issues include:

- a re-evaluation of Kachru's three circles model which criticised the power and influence of inner circle native speakers;
- the ownership of English;

- the gate-keeping function of English;
- the development of new varieties of English, both local varieties and English as an international language and as a lingua franca;
- the spread of Western values and cultures;
- the control or promotion of the spread of English.

Although I will not have time to cover all these issues in this article, important though they are, the final item in the list above brings us to the question of language policy and we shall see later just how much ESP has been and still is influenced by national and institutional language policies (Kennedy, 2001). We shall also see how ESP programmes have been implemented, raising issues in change and innovation theory. These broader issues are very relevant to ESP programmes and in what follows I shall try to demonstrate the relevance, taking ESP Projects as my theme.

UMESSP

My first experience of large-scale ESP project work was the University of Malaya English for Special Purposes Project (UMESPP) which clearly illustrates the various socio-political strands I have been describing. After Malaysian independence in 1957, a policy to establish Malay as the national language and support a Malay identity was gradually implemented throughout the education system. There was a shift over 14 years completed in 1980 (Hashim, 2009) from a colonial English-medium education to independent Malay-medium. An unsurprising consequence of the shift was a fall in levels of English competence among Malay university students who still needed English skills (especially reading skills) for access to their subject literatures in, for example, science and engineering, and who would also be required to have a working knowledge of English when entering the job market, especially if they were wishing to join international companies.

In response to these English language needs, a Language Centre had been set up in the University of Malaya, and from 1974 to 1978 an ESP Project (UMESPP) managed by the British Council and funded by the British aid agency ODA (Overseas Development Agency – now DfID – Department for International Development) operated with the University of Birmingham under John Sinclair as consultant partners. We can see clearly in

this instance the systemic nature of ESP with linkage between local Malaysian ideologically-driven language policies, external development agencies wishing to maintain influence over a politically important socio-economic area, and project development in ESP. We can also see the beginnings of an awareness of English as a global language and, something I shall mention briefly later, the importance of a knowledge of the theory and practice of innovation.

The ESP materials developed as part of the Project were highly innovative and signalled a clear move away from structural approaches to a communicative and more task-based approach to reading skills in particular. The materials were ahead of their time, and as an innovation perhaps too far ahead of their time. Certainly when published by Nelson in 1982 as *Skills for Learning* they did not sell especially well (University of Malaya, 1982).

Sinclair and Coulthard's *Towards an Analysis of Discourse* had been published in 1975 and Birmingham at the time was at the forefront of discourse analysis. Sinclair as consultant to the Project welcomed the opportunity to design reading materials based on a theory of written discourse, an approach he had trialled previously with *Concept 7-9*, a set of materials derived from a theory of spoken discourse. Because the Malaysian students were drawn from a variety of disciplines, the selection of texts had to be fairly "wide-angle", from social science and science themes written for a general audience. A decision was also made to use "authentic" texts. The materials were challenging for the students and far removed from approaches to text as a linguistic object (TALO) which they and the teachers were used to, instead treating text as a vehicle for information (TAVI) (Johns & Davies, 1983) and as an interaction between writer and reader. The theory-driven discourse-based approach to the materials resulted in lively and engaging exercises which moved students away from transmission approaches towards interpretation and enquiry.

UMESPP was a successful ESP Project in that it produced innovative materials demonstrating that a discourse-based approach to materials could work; it involved local Malaysian teachers and lecturers and trained them to design and write the materials (several project participants went on to successful careers in ELT); and it was a model for international collaboration and cooperation. However, in terms of longer term implementation the Project was not as successful as it might have been. It demanded a high level of linguistic and content knowledge and familiarity with new methodological

approaches from the Language Centre teachers responsible for teaching the materials. In-service seminars were regularly held but with hindsight, the project managers probably underestimated how much training and development was required. The major problem outside the control of the Project participants was that the Malaysian language policy to convert an English-medium educational system to Malay-medium was coming to successful completion.

The policy had been implemented at secondary school level, and shortly after the ending of UMESPP was introduced also at tertiary level. Students who, under the former language policy would have been educated through an English-medium system, were arriving at the University of Malaya as products of a Malay-medium secondary school system and were beginning to be educated through Malay at the University of Malaya. The level of English of those attending the ESP courses at the University was therefore understandably dropping so that the UMESPP materials were proving too difficult for current and future student audiences. As a consequence, within a few years, the UMESPP materials were abandoned, and the Language Centre was teaching general English from an established international textbook using a situational approach. The case illustrates a principle of educational change that all stakeholders should be taken into account when designing materials, and also clearly reveals how national language policy can influence pedagogical decisions taken further down the educational system.

I do not want to suggest at this point that UMESPP was unique. There were several significant ESP innovations during the 1970s. The British Council had run a ESP Project similar to UMESPP in Columbia (published as *Reading and Thinking in English* in 1979 with Widdowson as Series editor) which was discourse-based though less influenced by a Sinclairian than a Widdowsonian view of discourse already exemplified in the *English in Focus* series (Series editors: Allen & Widdowson, 1974 onwards). The *Nucleus* series (Series editors: Bates & Dudley-Evans, 1976 onwards) was perhaps the most successful in terms of impact of all the published materials that resulted from an ESP Project. Although originating in Tabriz University in Iran, the materials appealed to both teachers and students in ESP institutions in other parts of the world. One of the factors contributing to its success was that it took a new (at the time) notional-functional approach to ESP which appealed to practitioners who recognised materials design that took a step forwards, away from a traditional structural approach, but at the same time one in which they could recognise traces of the former familiar approach.

The *Nucleus* materials were therefore sufficiently innovative to raise interest and motivation in both teachers and learners, but not so revolutionary that they presented too great a challenge, which arguably the discourse approach of UMESPP did. This notion of a zone of acceptability is an important condition for successful change. Finally the Brazilian ESP Project was one of the few projects to become embedded in a higher education system (Holmes & Celani, 2006).

The Tunisian ESP Project

I have already mentioned above both the influence of politics and language policy on ESP, and ESP as educational innovation. Each of these elements was present in the next ESP Project with which I was involved in the 1980s, the objectives of which were to set up an ESP Resources Centre and to advise existing ESP Units based in Universities throughout Tunisia and help them if required with materials design and teacher development. This was an ODA/British Council project which had been requested by the Tunisian government who were concerned at one level that Tunisian undergraduates and postgraduates were not able to engage internationally in their subject disciplines because of a lack of English language skills. At another level, the project was responding to changes in government language policies which were legislating for the greater use of Arabic as a national and of English as an international language (thereby having the secondary effect of decreasing the use of French by Tunisians both nationally and internationally).

The Tunisian ESP Project demonstrated that ESP is not solely a linguistic activity and that ESP Projects need to learn from innovation theory if successful implementation is to occur. For instance, context is all-important. In this case, undergraduate students did not need English to graduate so motivation was not high. ESP Units were staffed by teachers seconded from secondary schools who were poorly paid (many had other teaching jobs in order to make ends meet) and lacking in ESP training. The project is more fully described in Kennedy (forthcoming) but what emerged was that ESP Projects take place within complex interrelating systems and that both top-down and bottom-up strategies, what I have termed an “ecological approach” (Kennedy & Tomlinson, forthcoming) is most effective.

ESP Projects in Central Europe

After this burst of activity in ESP Project work in the late 1970s and early 1980s, aid-funded ESP Project work declined. DfID changed its priorities and transferred funds from English language development to social intervention programmes alleviating poverty, arguing that ELT was a resource that could be paid for by those requiring it, signalling a clear market economy solution to ELT provision.

The political collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s and the consequent independence of the Central European states changed these views. The newly independent governments changed their language policy, replacing Russian with English as the first foreign language. The West saw the independence of the Central European states from the USSR as an opportunity to develop new markets. To achieve this market penetration the former state-driven economies had to be changed to market-based economies. The English language became a driver to achieve these ideological objectives since it was felt that an alternative political and economic ideology could best be accessed through English. Western businesses and management consultant firms set up branches in Central Europe, and the need for English to act as a lingua franca between those “selling” the new ideology and those “buying” it became acute. Britain’s Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) was given a dedicated budget managed by the British Council to develop several educational projects including ESP Projects in Central Europe to raise English language standards so that the ideology of the market economy could be more effectively spread. A description of these projects can be found on the *British Council Teaching English* website (see URL: teachingenglish.org.uk/transform/policy-makers/our-elt-projects/esp). I shall mention just one of the ESP Projects, the PROSPER Project (Bardi et al., 1999). The Project ran from 1991 to 1999 and was motivated by the post-Soviet Union political changes in that it was designed to reform the teaching and learning of ESP in 16 higher education institutions in Romania and raise English language levels of those destined for the international job market in such sectors as engineering and economics.

PROSPER provides a rare example of an extensive evaluation of an ESP Project’s impact and through a full description of the project’s evaluation methodology provides guidance and key findings generalisable to other ESP projects. These findings include: the creation of a culture of ownership and

responsibility for all stakeholders in the project; the importance of communication so that stakeholders are fully informed; and the necessity for process learning, flexibility and delegation amongst project participants to encourage commitment amongst teams (Bardi, 2012), all points derived from what we know about successful educational innovations. We can see once more in this example the interlinking of politics, language policy, English as a global language, and innovation theory in the successful implementation of an ESP Project.

Since the projects of the 1990s there has been little expansion in ESP Projects at the national level funded by development agencies. This may change for example in the Arab world once the political situation stabilises as there is likely to be a demand for educational and English language development projects after the chaos and confusions of the “Arab Spring” revolutions and ESP Projects may well be a part of such funded development.

ESP, internationalisation, and transnational education

Although large-scale development-funded ESP Project work has declined, ESP Project work of a somewhat different character is expanding. Its spread is connected with globalisation and the language policies particularly of international businesses, who are requiring, because English is increasingly used in international business domains, a bi- or multi-lingual workforce with English as one of the working languages. Those seeking to work with such organisations wish to be educated at tertiary level at least partly if not entirely in English-medium institutions. In the past the inclination of such students would have been to complete their education in English-speaking countries such as USA, UK and Australia, and indeed the majority still do, but many are seeking alternatives either in their own countries or in other countries offering transnational education where institutional language policies dictate that learning and teaching should take place in English. These transnational education trends are well-documented for example in British Council, 2004 & 2008; OECD, 2011; and the special issue of *Higher Education Policy* (Mok, 2012).

Student demand for English-medium education has resulted in universities world-wide acknowledging the necessity for English-speaking subject specialists at undergraduate and postgraduate levels and for staff themselves

to have access to English as an academic language for publication and career advancement. Such international interest in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) has, as we have seen from the projects I have described above, existed for many years. There is now a journal dedicated to EAP (*Journal of English for Academic Purposes*), and *Ibérica* itself has been publishing articles in the area for about 13 years. The process of internationalisation has accelerated, however, and universities where English is the medium of learning and teaching either in certain subjects or throughout the institution have expanded. Indeed *Ibérica* marked this development with a special issue devoted to the theme of English-medium education (*Ibérica* 22, 2011).

The institutions especially those that are fully English-medium are often private- rather than state-funded, and examples of good practice can be found for example in Turkey at the University of Bilkent and Middle East Technical University (METU) in Ankara, and Sabanci University in Istanbul. Such examples reveal that English-medium tertiary institutions are not always in those geographical areas historically associated with the English language. Thus Malaysia and Singapore are eager to use their greater historical familiarity with the English language to develop transnational hubs attracting students from outside their countries, but South Korea, Japan, Thailand, Kazakhstan and China are also setting up such hubs recruiting transnational students and increasing their income streams from new student markets. There are also examples of joint programmes across English-medium institutions, two of the most noteworthy perhaps being the linked UK-China programmes between Liverpool University and Xi'an Jiaotong University, and that between Nottingham University and Ningbo University which offer students the opportunity to study for split English-medium degrees in both the UK and the Chinese institutions.

Such educational policies have important consequences for ESP and EAP. Students enter such English-medium institutions generally from school where they have studied in their own language and have been taught a few hours per week of English as a foreign language. They need to increase their English language competence as quickly as possible after joining their university so that they can access their content subjects at tertiary level through the medium of English. The response to such a problem is generally the setting-up of English Language Centres where the students follow intensive English language programmes for at least one preparatory year so that in their second year they are able to start their subject content learning in science or finance for example through the medium of English. Such

challenges have led to highly innovative materials and methodologies among Language Centres, reported in the academic press and at international conferences, but there are also less widely reported and under-researched issues about the management of such programmes and their leadership. Transnational education will continue to expand and its development will provide new challenges for ESP and EAP over the next 20 years.

Conclusion

This has been a personal and inevitably partial account of past ESP developments with gaps and omissions that other contributors to this issue of *Ibérica* will no doubt fill. I have for example excluded comments on genre analysis, on the technological advances that have resulted in the important role that corpus linguistics plays in ESP research and to a lesser extent in pedagogy, and on the intercultural nature of ESP work. I have not mentioned the neglect of English for Occupational Purposes (EOP), which I hope will change with more attention given to this area of ESP work. I have tried to demonstrate however the societal motivations behind ESP Projects and have indicated the political context in which ESP operates. In particular I hope to have demonstrated the complexity of ESP Projects and the drivers of ESP - English as a global language, national and institutional language policy, and innovation and change. I congratulate AELFE on its valuable contribution to the ESP profession over the last 20 years, and wish it all success over the next 20 years in providing a forum for discussion of some of the ideas I and others have presented in this issue of its associated journal.

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