Specific Approaches for Specific Purposes- English for Business and Technology

Rajashekar
Department of English, University College of Arts, Tumkur University, Tumkur, Karnataka, India.

ABSTRACT

When the status of English changes from being a subject in its own right to a service industry for other specialisms, the approaches meant for teaching such English also warrant a few special considerations. Extending a blanket approach to the teaching of ESP as in the case of ESL, will result in gaps between performance levels and target requirements. English for business and technology is distinguished from General English not merely by the existence of learners' needs but by the teachers' awareness of such needs. It is not exactly the mastery of ESP teacher in the carrier content that motivates the learners of business and technology as much as his/her ability to drive home the real content using the carrier content as via media and planning interesting activities for the effective delivery of the content. Needs analysis is the epicentre of any sensible approach to the teaching of English for business. The language audit conducted by the teacher at the initial stages sensitizes him/her to the present proficiency levels of learners in a specific area and paves the way for an effective course design. This also projects the role of teacher more as a consultant available for help regarding specific problems in usage. The paper discusses the effectiveness of a few approaches to the teaching of English for business in the Indian context.

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Introduction
A Case for English for Specific Purposes:

> **Sonic Clues**
> For all those who know there's something wrong with their cars, but have no clue what the problem is or how much it will cost to fix, here's a chart hanging in my mechanic's garage along with prices:
>
> | | |
> |---|---|
> | *Ping, Click ping……* | ₹ 100/- |
> | *Click, Whir, click…..* | ₹ 300/- |
> | *Clunk, Whir, lunk……* | ₹ 550/- |
> | *Thud, clunk……..* | ₹ 1000/- |
> | *Clang, Thud, Clang…….* | ₹ 2000/- |
> | *I can't describe it……….* | ₹ 3000/- |
>
> Deam Given
> *Reader's Digest August 2012*

This board in front of a garage may not pose problems of comprehension as much as it would when sounds in italics are replaced by their technical jargons (especially for those who are not familiar with these words). It can be observed that the advertisement as such provides for general understanding and when replaced with technical vocabulary, it caters to specific audience. But even this specific audience is not deprived of comprehension in the presence of sound clues is a noteworthy point here.

This would almost tempt one to conclude that understanding of technical vocabulary does not constitute an essential part of comprehending the technical content.

Nevertheless, in order to defer the temptation, it would be sensible to consider the assimilation of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in the area of science and technology or business to the extent of emergence of dedicated disciplines- English for Science and Technology or English for Business Purposes.

Teaching of English to students of science or business whose first language is not English as a means of doing their work is essentially utilitarian. The learners need English as a means of enhancing their performance potentials and furthering their specialist education and research, and the language taught is isolated, to the extent possible, from its cultural and social experience.

But in its role of serving the specific requirements of the areas such as scientific inquiry, observation, manipulation of data, formulation of hypothesis, research assumptions, construction of theories, negotiations, presentations, etc… English has hardly retained its status of a language and has become more of a tool that is tailor-made to encompass all these and more. Further, the variety of texts or genres being taught using English have only fronted the applicative part of the language rather than the linguistic part thereby reducing, in most of the cases, English to another subject. This predicament of English is well depicted in the words of Claudius in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*:

> *"And like a man to double business bound,*
> *I stand in pause where I shall first begin,*
> *And both neglect."*
> -Act III Scene III *Hamlet* by Shakespeare

English for Business and Technology in India:

The concept of English for Business and Technology in India needs to be approached differently. The teachers andlearners here are non-native speakers of English operating with the language only in academic and official contexts excluded from its communicative and other social functions. The language taught may be exclusively scientific or business at the content level but not at the transaction level, that is, there isn't any 'scientific' or 'business' way of teaching English except for focussing on a few genre related linguistic peculiarities, for example, passive constructions, conditionals, impersonal use of personal pronouns, persuasion skills, comparison, etc…

It is certainly possible to show that there are features characteristic of technical English. But it should be borne in mind that much of this difference derives from the fact that most of the work in this field has focussed on written academic texts. However, this form of text is not actually representative of technical English in general, nor is the apparent difference from general English so clear cut as it might first appear. It should be seen as a refinement rather than as a separate type.

The content of technical education is more readily available in English than in our regional languages and hence comprehension of technical terminology is less problematic in English than it is in regional languages. But whether the comfort levels available to learners at the comprehension zone can be carried on effectively to the production zone depends on the effectiveness of the transaction or the instructional design.

Concept comprehension occurs in learners with some abstract thinking backed by the communicating urge. In most of the cases, the cognitive strategies aiding concept comprehension are not complemented by linguistic abilities which accounts for poor production levels. Learner operates between two codes-English for technical terminology and his/her language for structures. As a result, he/she fronts the technical terminology and pushes structures to the end, displaying their discomfort. Further, the errors committed by learners also defy any specific categorization as per conventional grammar principles, thereby making the instructor's job all the more difficult and challenging.

The language requires so much processing when our learners are learning science as they are processing an unfamiliar language of science in an unfamiliar language used as the medium of instruction. This also accounts for their mediocre performance.

Teacher's Role:

It would be interesting to note, however, that the errors committed by the learners do not actually interfere with their intelligibility and comprehension of the content. Mere *'fill-in-the-blanks-with-verbs'* exercises of the instructors will not help the learners get at the root of their problems but discourse awareness will probably be of some help. Though teachers rely much on immersion in technical language to take care of the learners' errors, maximizing meaning-making or meaning-negotiating strategies without explicit instruction will do the job for the teachers. Since one experiences some difficulties in dealing with formal technical expressions even in one's mother tongue, it would be unreasonable to expect that our learners would get at the discourse of technical instruction in a foreign or second language like English easily.

Strevens (1977) believes that scientists function in a host language using the same system of pronunciation, same accent, same common grammar, rules of spelling and orthography, and even a lot of the common non-specialised vocabulary as anyone else, i.e. all the parts are there, but the proportions in the mixture are different. The difference between technical English and general English is not to the extent of necessitating a separate linguistic competence to comprehend the same.

The pedagogy of technical English largely rests on the presence of visual display and hence language, in effect, ceases to be the primary element in communication: it takes on an interpretive role-explaining, highlighting or contextualising which the student visually observes. Language becomes meaningful only when related to the visual. Specific technical terms, in fact, tend to take a back seat as general vocabulary is preferred by the teachers to the use of specific technical vocabulary. Further, teachers gloss these special technical words as and when they are used with the learners.

e.g. These bacteria are *parasitic* in nature.

Parasitic meaning they depend on a host for all their activities and harm the host in turn.

Further, the way language is used with scientific concepts differs from the way language is used with everyday concepts. Whereas everyday concepts depend upon experiences and words (concrete plus abstract), scientific concepts are understood, used and expressed primarily in words (abstractions alone). The words take on different and unique meanings when used as scientific concept words. They are no longer used for communication alone but as a part of 'system of knowledge'. The learning is mediated not by experience but by words and symbols.

Learners' Perspective:

The ability of students to mimic or copy the scientific concepts introduced to them in formal learning situations cannot be taken as evidence of their development. This may be termed as the use of '*tool-for-result'* (Newman and Holzman) aimed at the fulfilment of immediate needs like passing the exam, etc…. Use of '*tool-and-result'*, on the other hand, contributes to the internalization of concepts taught and equips them with the ability to use their general language abilities to talk about procedures and processes that we label 'technical'.

References made by the teachers to other areas of knowledge the student is familiar with help the student retain the information learnt. Retention of new and unfamiliar information is further aided by the association of ideas. However, non-native students of ESP in the Indian context are not completely equipped to exploit this strategy of association of ideas.

e.g. the words 'front engine' 'rear engine', 'pedal'.

Since our students are at a disadvantage of not being able to associate the words 'front', 'rear' and 'pedal' with known ideas, they are faced with new concepts unrelated to the rest of their knowledge.

This hampers the assimilation of new terms. This clearly points to the issue discussed earlier that specific technical vocabulary does not, in effect, pose any problems of comprehension and can be comprehended by achieving familiarity with general English vocabulary.

As a matter of fact, through ESP instruction, teachers aim to equip the students to handle with ease, both as producers and receivers, the macro-structure of a piece of technical communication; the ability to conceive a description that proceeds logically from introduction to conclusion: describing an equipment for all the functions of its individual components; reporting the observation in experiments and stating the inference; explaining a process by following all the steps in a

coherent order; stating arguments in favour of or against a proposition.

At this point, it would also be apt to consider the attitude of science students towards language. The response of students of technology towards teaching of English language is exemplified in the box.

Regional Institute of English South India (RIESI) Bengaluru prepared a book titled "English for Engineers" published by Foundation Books in 2006 to be transacted in Engineering institutions. Siddaganga Institute of Technology (SIT), Tumkur, Karnataka offered the book as a course to its III semester Engineering and Management students in 2007. As I was on rolls as the faculty at RIESI and was also a part of the preparation of that book, I was assigned the responsibility of teaching on the course at SIT, Tumkur. If it were not for the compulsory attendance, internal assessment and intervention of faculty of SIT, the students would probably have driven us out of classes. Given the merits of the book in integrating language skills with content drawn from science, technology and management, the reluctance of the learners to allow any teaching – learning related to language was a matter of concern. Though a few activities like debate, quiz, group discussion, etc., clicked here and there, the whole course was characterised by the continued treatment of the content as 'hostile' by the students. It was evident that the indifference of these students towards English was certainly not backed by their competence in English language but by the general reluctance to learn something that was not overtly related to their field. Further, we learnt from the data given to us by the Department of Placements in the institution that lack of communication skills in English was one of the main reasons for the failures in campus interviews. The language of science that these students had learnt had no doubt ensured them good percentage in their tests and examinations but had not equipped them with the ability to put across their thoughts with clarity, precision and brevity as would be expected from people of science.

The attitudes of science students learning English as a language at the intermediate or plus two level (I have taught English language and literature at the intermediate level with the Department of Pre-university Education, Govt. of Karnataka for nearly eight years) and those of the management students (students of different management institutions trained by RIESI as part of its academic calendar) were not much different either.

Underlying these attitudes of students of science and technology and management is their failure to recognise the importance of linguistic features of general English in aiding their comprehension of specific technical content. Engaging constantly with the content of science and technology and management renders them oblivious to the support extended by language in equipping them to talk/write about these subjects and thus hampers their expression abilities.

The result of their indifference to linguistic features while learning the prescribed content does not attract them to their prospective employers during campus interviews except when the employers choose to address these lacunae through in-service induction programmes. National Skill Development Commission (NSDC) of our country has also echoed the importance of communicative skills among the youth in order to become successfully 'employable'.

Various schools, colleges and higher educational institutions have responded to this need by integrating market-relevant skills such as Group Discussion, Negotiation skills, Presentation skills, etc… in their curriculum in order to bridge the gap between classroom performance of the learners and their field level requirements. What follows is an attempt to look at some of the approaches or methods being practised in institutes of management and technology in the teaching of English.

Case analysis approach is adopted by some management institutions wherein the students discuss and analyse specific case studies with reference to the issue in question. Individual groups make presentations of their findings and the teacher, in his/her consolidation, summarizes the study with a balanced focus on content and language. More often than not, cases are drawn from western situations, posing problems of adaptability.

Simulations are a feature of some institutions affording opportunity for the students for the display of their awareness of content and language in simulated situations. The movement is normally from controlled-to-guided-to-free situations, gradually minimising the role of teacher and enhancing the scope for learner autonomy. Students' use of 'carrier content' and 'real content' is carefully monitored by the teacher, recording his/her observations, wherever possible. Intergroup/ intragroup evaluation and peer assessment techniques are attempted in this approach along with teacher interventions in places required.

Projects play a vital role in equipping the learners with the language tools they require for target situations. Many institutes of higher learning and universities collaborate with several companies and organizations of repute for project work and thus provide hands-on experience to their students regarding field specific requirements. In addition to building leadership skills, ability to handle peer pressure and team spirit, project work also serves to expose the trainees to the nuances of language in the workplace, improves their interpersonal skills, enables them to use language for specific purposes like interviewing, negotiating, etc…

Group Discussion and Presentation skills are almost indispensable part of the syllabi of any management/ technological institution. They are, at once, approaches to teaching language and also effective modes of driving home the carrier content. Niceties such as introducing the topic, turn taking, turn giving, manoeuvring, interrupting, suggesting a change of topic, summing up, handling doubts, agreeing, disagreeing, persuading, etc… are illustrated by the teacher with appropriate examples. Students add to the open-ended list of expressions to perform these language functions effectively, given the mode and tenor of the discourse.

Let us revisit the temptation we passed in the beginning of the paper-understanding of technical vocabulary does not constitute an essential part of comprehending the technical content. One may not know the definitions of 'fiscal crunch, inflation, etc… but one may talk about them with a reasonable

understanding by internalizing the carrier content without using explicit technical terminologies.

The main difference in learning business/technology by our students and the native speakers lies in the fact that our students are learning the content and language as two separate entities whereas the native speakers are learning it as a whole. The students' inherent understanding of the demands made by these fields, for example, describe, hypothesise, record, compare, contrast, explain, classify, define, instruct, question, speculate, infer, predict, illustrate, conclude, argue, analyse, design, theorize, state, etc… in the field of science, negotiating, persuading, convincing, arguing, making a point of view, etc… in business and so on needs to be supplemented by the teachers in order to make them communicatively competent.

Further, the fields of business and technology are on a changing spree and more so with the revolutionizing of the field of advertising. Any approach or method that is not in tune with the changing demands of these fields serves only to widen the gap between the performance levels of the students and the target requirements.

A television brand advertised "*Believe in the Best*" to boost its sales.

Another brand shot back "*Better than the Best*" to sweep the market.

The dynamism and adaptability of the field have made it more vulnerable, so much so that, it would be unreasonable to expect one approach to hold the floor for long unless it meets the requirements of the user public. The field has always thrown open challenges for practitioners warranting quality interventions with precision and specificity in their approaches.

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