

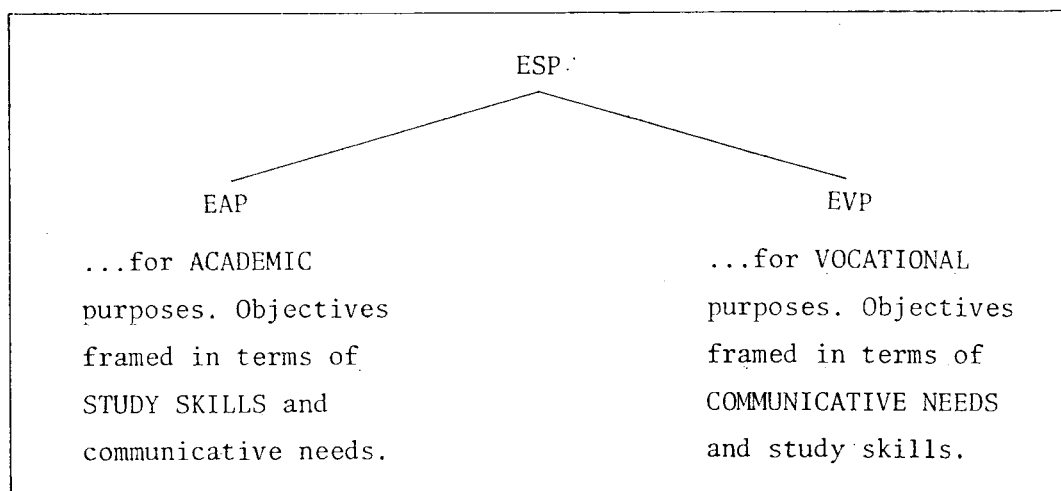
Newsletter : Teaching Reading in an EAP course

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Do you have any suggestions on material suitable for teaching reading in an EAP course ?

Since the term 'EAP' is quite widely used in Thailand in reference to university courses in English, it is worth establishing exactly the nature of the concept that it embodies.

A recent (January 1982) 'state of the art' paper from the English Language Service Department of the British Council in London makes the following clarification in 'an attempt to define an orthodoxy in ESP'.



And it adds, 'On either side of the division, the mix will vary from case to case.' An initial point to make in view of the widespread currency of the initials in Thailand, is that EST-English for Science and Technology-can serve either or both of EAP and EVP; but, perhaps self-evidently since it lacks the initial 'P', it

does not in itself constitute a prime category for course design : it serves a 'higher level' purpose (that must itself be defined), in just the same way, for example, that English for Business does.

Leaving aside the situation where English is a medium of study in one or more subjects at school, an ESP course is an attempt to meet the language requirements that students may have but find they cannot meet after their school English programme. Thus the establishing of what these requirements—or purposes—are, as well as of the characteristics of the learners in question, is fundamental to any ESP course design. As Mackay and Mountford (1978) comment, 'In many cases, courses which purport to teach "English for Businessmen", "French for Engineers"... have failed because they were not based on an identification of the actual uses to which language was required to be put by such learners.'

One of the first areas to be clarified, therefore, in designing an EAP course is what the requirements of the students concerned are. That is (with reference to the diagram above), it is necessary to establish what study skills the students need (note-taking from written or aural sources? reading what kinds of text material with what linguistic characteristics? writing reports from what sources? etc), and what communicative needs they may have as well (joining in seminars? reporting orally in English? interviewing experts? etc). Since the question that this short article has to answer assumes reading-only skills, we at least have an initial delimitation; but we still need to know what kinds of text students will have to read (general academic texts? specialised 'learned' texts? periodicals—like 'New Scientist', or like 'Newsweek'? works of reference? etc). We also need to know in what reading skill areas the students are (after their school course) deficient : skills concerning reading approaches such as scanning and skimming; the ability to recognise quickly the appropriate functions of academic text (general statements; classifications; hypotheses; restatements; summings-up; etc); the ability to distinguish authorial implication from exposition; knowledge of the uses of specific structural patterns; the ability to make satisfactory working inferences about unknown lexical items. And so on.

It is at this point that the designer of an EAP course in a university such as Chulalongkorn may start to have problems. Informed guesses and testing procedures may enable him to establish the deficiencies that students have (the second of the above two areas), if inexactly due to the scale involved; but how much information is available to him as to what the requirements of students are? Do they in fact have any *actual* requirements at all? If only a small number of students are ever required to study by reading English, and those only in their 3rd or 4th year, or even at postgraduate level, how can a large-scale EAP course in their 1st or 2nd year help them? The best it can do is address itself to their future needs, insofar

as these may be able to be specified; but in so doing it runs the risk of encountering the problems that the general school programme encountered : lack of relevance, thus of motivation, and thus of learning.

There is a further problem, too : that of how *teachable* the reading skill actually is. Swales (1978), referring to his decision to develop a 'Writing Scientific English' course at the Faculty of Engineering, University of Libya, comments, 'It seems to me...that it does not necessarily follow from the fact that reading has been identified as being the greatest need that it should be assigned the largest proportion of language time. It does not follow because it is equally important to consider what the language teacher can most usefully do in the limited time available to him. In other words, decisions about course priorities should be partly based on an assessment of the circumstances under which teacher intervention in the learning process is essential, where it is useful and where it is of marginal advantage.' At the very least, therefore, one might argue in Chulalongkorn's situation for an integrated reading and writing course, where the former activity informs and stimulates the latter.

All this, however, is to bring a negative answer to the question, which, recognising an existing situation, I must attempt to answer. In fact I see the essential problem underlying this situation as one of motivation (which of course in an ESP course proper comes principally—though by no means exclusively—from the meeting of actual needs); and I shall attempt to answer it from the premises that I feel should underlie all our more general courses. To make specific reference to CULI's existing 2nd-year Reading Course : are students who have no actual requirements for reading English likely to be motivated by a course that places heavy emphasis on the functions common to fairly specialised texts—of a common range—and their linguistic exponents? If motivation is not present, then little real learning will take place.

So : abandon the notion of a text-based course, which inevitably carries with it the implication for students—and sometimes even ajarns—of an actual corpus of knowledge, whether in content or language terms, and put the emphasis instead on the more general skills needed to read : quick recognition at the many different levels required by an efficient reader; extension of vocabulary; reading in different ways for different purposes. Present them with a variety of different kinds of text, from the serious to the colloquial. Make the texts focus around a general theme, and give the students the opportunity to become conceptually involved with it (they are, after all, intelligent, and they are not—I exclude English Major students—necessarily interested in the language, let alone in becoming discourse analysts). Above all, require them to need to use what they read : for information transfer, to solve

problems in groups, to evaluate—respecting their intelligence by allowing them to do this in Thai. And by requiring them to need to use what they read, you may be able at least to come some way to simulating the rationale of an EAP course, which is where I started: the possession of a purpose for studying English.

References

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