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ABSTRACT

Discussion of the teaching of English for special purposes (ESP) challenges two assumptions: that ESP (1) is for adults; and (2) should be taught after students have mastered a core of general English skills. Further, it is proposed that it may be more appropriate to teach ESP in upper secondary education. The paper draws on teaching experience in a Malay-medium Brunei secondary school, where students of English as a Second Language (ESL) were not well motivated and did not learn English well until taught English for specific purposes (ESP), (in this case, academic), which emphasized study skills. An overview is given of the current education system in Brunei, and sociocultural factors in Brunei society that do not support the learning of general ESL, including minimal inter-ethnic use of English, small degree of extra-cultural contact, fear of Western cultural encroachment, and attitudes that are not always favorable. It is argued that in this context, motivation to learn English must be derived from the language content taught. A survey of secondary students indicates that they have clear perceptions of their language needs, for academic English skills. Integration of EAP with secondary school content area instruction is recommended, with general English taught in postsecondary education. (Contains 20 references.) (MSE)

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From General English to ESP: Bridging the Gap

Paul Steinhausen

Abstract

Teaching English for Specific Purposes is a fast growing area. ESP courses, however, are usually taken later rather than sooner, when the participants are either already settled in a job (EOP), or when they are embarked on a course of advanced study at sixth form or university level (EAP). There is a danger of providing too little too late.

My paper will examine the desirability of **specialised** English teaching at an earlier stage. Initially, I shall draw on my own and colleagues' experiences of teaching EAP to Malay-medium A-level students in a sixth form college in Brunei.

Extending from this, I shall then look at the possibility of targeting language more accurately even earlier, in school, as students make their subject choices.

My argument will be that the present gap between General English at school level and ESP at tertiary level is unnecessary. At the very least there should be some sort of General English - English Across the Curriculum - EAP - EOP **continuum**. I shall also suggest that General English does not always have to precede ESP.

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Introduction

While definitions of ESP have been modified and refined over the years, two assumptions have remained more or less constant. First, that ESP is for adults. Second, that ESP comes after the students already have a 'core' of General English. Both assumptions need closer examination.

It is not difficult to understand the close association of specific language teaching with *adult* learners. As Kennedy and Bolitho (1984 p2) say, it is partly because students are, "in contrast to their former school learning experience, ... well aware of their purpose in learning the language". McDonough (1984 p23) makes a similar point when she asserts that the majority of ESP learners are adults "since it is only by that age that they have developed a specialism or job preference". I shall question, however, whether this presumption of a lack of purpose in school pupils is, or at least *needs* to be, true, certainly in the situation in which I am now working.

Similarly, I am not convinced of the *sine qua non* of conventional ESP wisdom that a common core of language needs to be mastered before specialised language courses begin. The idea expressed nearly thirty years ago by Close (1965) of EST teaching being like a series of building blocks - starting with a general purpose foundation, moving on to a general scientific structure, and finishing with a specific scientific superstructure - is still attractive, and also probably accurate in many ESP situations. But what if, in certain other situations, a 'whole house' (to continue the building analogy) is not required in ter[illegible] English language competence? Can the order of the building blocks be changed? Can sor[illegible] omitted altogether?

EAP at Sixth Form Level

For four years I taught in the English Language Matriculation Unit (ELMU) of a sixth form college in Brunei. Our students came from a Malay-medium school system and were embarking upon Malay-medium A levels. They also had to pass an English language matriculation examination to gain entry to the local university on completion of their sixth form studies. On arrival at the college, most of these students were 'false beginners' in English. We adopted what seemed the obvious format of a year's General English Foundation Course followed by two years' EAP related to their subject areas. But the General English component did not really work. The students did not like it. They progressed very slowly, if at all. They could not see the *point*. Only when the EAP courses started, with their strong emphasis on study skills, did the students show enthusiasm. Apart from the obvious reason that these were skills they actually needed for their A level subjects, it appeared there was another factor involved. It was Curran (1976) who argued that the student often perceives the knowledge of the teacher as a threat which arouses emotional resistance to learning. At ELMU this teacher-knowledge, at least as far as subject matter was concerned, could by no means be taken for granted. I taught a group of students who were studying Ugama (Islamic Religion) for A level. I am not a Moslem. It was certainly not my place to 'teach religion' to the students. Nevertheless, I found it a useful vehicle to achieve a partial reversal of the traditional teacher-learner role. For once, I was able to ask questions of my students to which I did not know the answer. For example, in a *Using a Contents Page* activity, with two groups of students referring to different books on the Haj, one question was how many pebbles are gathered at Mina. The answers in the two books were different. I could not understand why. The responsibility was on the students to explain to the teacher the reason for the apparent discrepancy - what Early (1981 p48) refers to as "a trade-off between ignorance and knowledge".

Also at the sixth form college, I taught students who came from an English-medium school background. Clearly, their level of English was higher than the Malay-medium students. But they still had very real problems with both the language and the skills required in their A level subjects. So much so that my former colleagues have had to devise an EAP remedial programme to be taken by all English-medium students at the college. It is an example, I suppose, of the view expressed by Allen and Widdowson (1978 p51) that one aim of ESP is to "repair the deficiencies of secondary school teaching". If we accept the precept that prevention is better than cure, then we should be looking at what goes on much earlier than at sixth form level. We should be looking at the English taught in secondary school and, possibly, even before that, in primary school.

English in Schools

In 1985, a bilingual education system was introduced into all Bruneian government schools. Its implementation has been phased in gradually, and is now complete. From Primary Class Four to Secondary Form Six, Geography, Science, Mathematics, Economics and technical subjects are taught in English, while Bahasa Melayu, History, Islamic Monarchy, Physical Education and Art are taught in Malay. The students also receive about an hour's English language teaching each day. It is that English language content that I now want to look at.

In 1991, a new Form One English textbook, *Secondary English for Brunei Darussalam 1 (SEBD)* (Macmillan 1990), was introduced into all Bruneian secondary schools. This was followed by Form Two and Form Three books. They are written by teachers with a wide experience of the classroom in Brunei. Units include:

Form	Topic	Structures	Use of Language
One	The Lost Island: A Fairy Story	First Conditional Gerund.	Telling a story.
Two	Houses: A day in the Life of a Customs Officer	Present simple, there is/are, some/any, how many ...? Wh- questions, the time, countable and uncountable nouns.	Giving personal information. Describing Routines.
Three	Work and Play: A day at the beach; Producing a TV programme	Past Continuous; relative clauses; conjunctions	Describing ongoing events in the past; defining people and things; making greetings and requests; talking about likes and dislikes

In many ways it is a good course. It takes what is essentially a structural syllabus produced by the Curriculum Development Department and links the structures to a variety of communicative functions. It is a 'General English' course which claims to show "a strong awareness of the needs and aspirations of Bruneian students". It certainly contains a lot of Brunei-specific material: A flight with Royal Brunei Airlines, The Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin mosque, and so on. Whether

this really fulfils the students' needs, however, is not so certain.

Acculturation

As in some other parts of South East Asia, and indeed around the world, Bruneians, out of school, have very little need for the 'General English' taught *in* school. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the progress they make is slow and that when they reach sixth form level there are, as we have seen, serious deficiencies in the language and skills they need for their studies.

Schumann's (1978) Acculturation Model is relevant here. This attempts to explain the difference in social perceptions between groups and individuals who are prepared to learn a second language, and those who are unwilling or unable to do so. If, argues Schumann, a learner or group of learners rejects the target language culture, then language learning is unlikely to occur.

I do not think Bruneians reject English language culture outright, but in terms of **Integration Strategies** (to use Schumann's term) there is certainly a great deal of conflict. On the one hand, Bruneians have access to western media (films, television, magazines and so on) - and they *do* feel a certain attraction towards the apparently glamorous and exciting lifestyle portrayed in, say, *Dallas* or *MacGuyver*. On the other hand, that same lifestyle is not altogether compatible with their religion and their traditional cultural values. In addition, they see the *un*glamorous violence and squalor of London and New York from news broadcasts and documentaries. On balance, the pull away from the target language culture is probably stronger than the pull towards it. Some of Schumann's other categories are also apposite:

Degree of Enclosure[1]. English is not much used as an inter-ethnic language in Brunei. A Chinese or an Iban speaking to a Malay is likely to use Bahasa Melayu not English.

Cohesiveness and Size of Learners' Group. There is much more Bruneian-Bruneian contact than Bruneian-Non Bruneian contact.

Congruence. That is, similarities between cultures. There is in Brunei an increasing fear of western cultural encroachment.

Attitudes. Favourable attitudes encourage language learning. But, as we have seen, attitudes in Brunei are not unequivocally favourable.

Learner Needs

I have related these categories to Brunei, but there are regional parallels. For instance, degree of enclosure has relevance in Malaysia; and congruence has implications for Indonesia. Certainly, as we develop English language teaching in other countries in this area - for example, there is considerable activity going on in Vietnam and Cambodia at the moment - we need to think very carefully of the actual *needs* of the school children, their **specific purpose** for learning English.

[1] I am indebted for this information to a seminar given on 10 February 1993 at Universiti Brunei Darussalam by Mohd Gary Jones on *Dwi Bahasa: Recent Research Developments.*

In this context, Hutchinson and Waters (1987 p19) provide a useful definition of ESP as "an approach, not a product. It is an approach to language learning which is based on learner need". It should also, of course, be based on what a learner *wants*. A combination of wants and needs should provide the ideal **purpose** of an ESP course. Yet even fifteen years on, the view of Mackay and Mountford (1978 p2) that at school level "the purpose of learning the language is essentially ... deferred" remains a common one. Why **should** it be deferred? We are back again to the idea that ESP is suitable only for adults, that, as Kennedy and Bolitho (1984 p13) say, "the older a learner is, the more likely he is to have his own definite ideas on why he is learning English".

It is my experience that, on the contrary, school children are very aware of why they are learning English and of what their needs are. On 2 March 1993 I administered a short questionnaire to 58 Form Three students (See Appendix). The first question asked whether they needed English more in school or out of school. Nearly 85% said in school. Nearly 87% said that they needed English in school a lot or quite a lot, whereas just under 70% said that out of school they needed English not much or not at all.

The implication is clear. What students need, more than topics in SEBD such as *Giving Directions Around Bandar Seri Begawan* or *Buying Things in a Shop*, is language related to the here and now of their study situation, for, as McDonough (1984 p90) says, "the closer the language instruction to the students' own reality, the more motivated they will be and the more efficient their learning".

Motivation is, of course, vital. But how much motivation can we reasonably expect from students who, as we have seen, show only a limited amount of acculturation towards the target language? What *sort* of motivation can we expect? And what sort of English language content is likely to best harness that motivation?

Motivation

The most consistent research on motivation, over a period of 30 years, has been undertaken in Canada by Robert C Gardner. Just this year he has co-written an article in *Language Teaching* (Gardner and MacIntyre 1993) about affective variables in second language learning. His analyses have been applied to the attitudes and motivations of English-speaking high school students learning French as a second language in anglophone settings in Canada. This is roughly analogous to the situation we have in Brunei of students learning English in a bilingual, semi-immersion system. In his earlier research, Gardner suggested that an integrative motivation - "reflecting a sincere and personal interest in the people and culture" (Gardner and Lambert 1972 p132) - was needed for successful language learning. But increasingly Gardner has stressed the importance of instrumental motivation - reflecting the practical advantage of learning a language - in certain situations, for instance where there is a 'fear of assimilation'. In these circumstances, the learner is likely to emphasise what Giles et al (1977) call 'psychological distinctiveness', and acquisition of the target language will progress only to the point where instrumental needs are fulfilled.

There are two implications to this. First, that from what we have seen of Schumann's Acculturation Model, motivation in Brunei is likely to be instrumental rather than integrative. Second, that instrumental needs are narrower, more *specific*, than integrative ones. As Kennedy and Bolitho (1984 p15) say, "ESP programmes, by their nature, tend to emphasise the instrumental aspect of a student's motivation".

Certainly, the Bruneian students I asked in my questionnaire (Appendix) were quite clear about their motivation for learning English. They were asked to place the following three sentences in order of importance:

I am studying English because
(a) It will help me get a good job.
(b) It will help me pass my school exams.
(c) It will help me get to know English people better.

Nearly 90% chose (b) as the most or equal-most important. Nearly 50% chose (a) as the most or equal-most important. Only 5.3% chose (c) as the most important. 89.5% chose (c) as the least important.

Taking the questionnaire as a whole, what comes across is, firstly, that the students have quite clear perceptions of their own English needs; and, secondly, that those needs are seen as being in school and for passing the school examinations, not only in English language but also in the other subjects studied through English medium.

English for School Purposes

There may be a case, therefore, for moving the secondary English language syllabus away from the general towards the specific, towards English for School Purposes. It must be stressed that such a narrowing down should not take away the communicative value of the language taught. I agree with Munby (1978) that "ESP courses are those where the syllabus and materials are determined in all essentials by the prior analysis of the **communicative** needs of the learner". But the narrowing down *does* admit that the immediate communicative needs of the students are quite limited, and it these that should be concentrated on. David Nunan (1990) writes of the importance of using learner data in curriculum development. He is talking about the Australian Migrant Education Programme where a principal aim is to enable learners to communicate socially and transactionally **outside** the classroom. That is clearly valuable for learners who are going into a situation where English is the main language of communication. But in other situations, including in Brunei, we have seen that English is **not** an important medium of communication out of school. It seems perverse, therefore, to teach it as such, with a view to vaguely perceived possible future needs as opposed to definite immediate ones.

So what would English for School Purposes involve? First and foremost, we would need to examine the linguistic and communicative demands of other subjects in the school. That is, we should think about language across the curriculum, a notion introduced in the Bullock Report (1975) for mother tongue English teaching in UK, but which is equally applicable to school-based ESP, of which there are two types, identified by Kennedy and Bolitho (1984) as:

1. **Independent ESP**, where English is a separate subject on the curriculum, but with a related content to other subjects.

2. **Integrated ESP**, where English is the medium for learning other subjects.

At the moment, the English taught in Brunei is neither one nor the other. It is independent, in the sense that it is a separate subject, but the content is not obviously related to other subjects. It is also integrated, in that other subjects *are* learnt through English medium instruction. But, again, the relevance of the English in 'English' lessons to the English in 'Other Subject' lessons

is not clear. The more English is seen as *part* of the other subjects rather than as a separate subject competing with the other subjects for the students' time and commitment, the better.

Liaison

But to achieve such true integration, a considerable amount of co-operation and liaison is required between the English language teacher and the subject teacher. White (1981 p14) goes so far as to claim that "without the advice of a subject specialist, the help we can give the student is severely restricted". Certainly, a lot of collaboration is required, firstly on the actual language needed. Of particular importance is vocabulary. Kennedy and Bolitho (1984) intimate that it is more dangerous in ESP than in General English to let vocabulary take care of itself, to be acquired through osmosis. They go on to say that (pp65-66) "before merely adding a word to a never-ending list, a student should at least be encouraged to think about its value to him". And, as we have seen, the value of an item of vocab to a Bruneian school student is probably school-based. Therefore words such as *reflection, force, intense, dense* and so on, are more likely to be encountered in their sub-technical than in their general sense, so there seems little point in teaching the latter in preference to the former.

Secondly, collaboration is needed on the **skills** required. McDonough (1984 p63) states that ESP has been a prime mover in redefining the boundaries between skills. Just as, according to Holmes (1979), "subject teaching offers an excellent opportunity for the teaching of study skills and their integration with the course of study itself", so EAP groups at any level are certain to need, for example, reference and library skills. We are moving away from simply *what* learners learn, towards *how* they learn it. Hutchinson and Waters (1987 p69) sum it up when they say that "a skills-centred approach aims to get away from the surface performance data and look at the competence that underlies the performance". This was the rationale of the University of Malaya ESP materials such as *Skills for Learning* (1980), which concentrated on the underlying **learning** processes, particularly those involved in reading. The key word is **learning**. I agree with Hutchinson and Waters (1987 p14) that "a truly valid approach to ESP must be based on an understanding of the processes of language *learning*". In an English across the curriculum situation, students are, to paraphrase Holmes (1979), not simply learning English; nor are they simply learning science, maths or whatever; rather, they are learning how to learn in English.

Which means careful thought about the materials. We want materials that encourage learners to learn, that contain interesting texts and enjoyable activities which engage the learners' thinking capacities and are relevant to their needs.

Culture

We should also consider the students' own culture, for, as Barron (1991) says, "ignoring or denigrating the students' culture may also have academic consequences, leading to poor academic performance". Connected with this, we need to take into account the students' previous learning experience and their consequent expectations. While we may agree with Kennedy and Bolitho (1984) that much ESP material should adopt a problem-solving approach, stressing active student participation and involvement, to a Bruneian student more used to a methodology based on teacher-talk and rote memorisation, there may be initial reluctance. ESP implies the aim to *communicate* for a specific purpose, so, in Webb's (1979 p4) words, "the student must come to see the learning process as requiring an active, participating approach on his part, as distinct from the passive approach so aptly described as 'I am a bucket. Fill me!'". We have to move **gradually** towards students taking more responsibility for their own learning. One way I encourage teachers taking the RSA courses we run in Brunei to achieve this is to embark on

project work with their students. This, of course, is a common feature on most kinds of extended ESP courses. Certainly, we need to get away from the teacher as the fount of all knowledge.

Which brings me back full circle to what I was saying at the beginning of this paper about the suitability of ESP courses for reversing the traditional teacher-learner role.

Conclusion

For brevity's sake, I have concentrated in this paper on EAP more than EOP. But I think it is true that, at present, ESP courses, whether EAP or EOP, tend to be taken later rather than sooner. A model of English language teaching is often something like this:

School General English		Tertiary / Work EAP - ESP - EOP

Fig.1

There is thus a great gap between 'General English', which comes first, and 'ESP' which comes after and which builds on and repairs the deficiencies of the 'General English'.

The danger of such a model is twofold. One, it implies that language learning moves from the general to the particular. Two, it implies that General English and ESP are separate entities. Neither seems to me to be true.

That General English and ESP are part and parcel of the same thing is attested to by many others, including: Hutchinson and Waters (1987 p142), "The principles which underlie good ESP methodology are the same as those that underlie sound ELT methodology in general"; McDonough (1984 p4), "ESP is not totally different from other areas of language teaching"; and Kennedy and Bolitho (1984 p7), "It is important not to regard ESP as an area of development separate from the rest of ELT. It is part of the recent move ... towards a more communicative basis for teaching and learning". In my paper, I have tried to emphasise the communicative purpose of ESP in schools - that is, **real** communicative needs limited to the school environment, particularly to the English medium subject areas, rather than broader communicative needs which for Bruneian school students, as for students in other countries, barely exist in the present and, for many, are unlikely to exist in the future either.

That General English does not have to come before ESP is perhaps slightly more contentious, but it is surely a logical extension of the idea already mentioned that General English and ESP are not completely separate. Certainly, ESP implies a specific **aim**. But that need not imply a special **language**. As Kennedy and Bolitho (1984 p19) say, "we must be careful not to imagine that those aspects of English which are related to a specific subject somehow form a language apart from 'general' English".

While there may be a higher proportion of 'difficult' structures in ESP (for example, more conditionals and passives in Scientific English) than in General English, that does not mean to say the 'easy' structures like the Present Simple are **absent** from the Scientific English, so there seems no reason not to teach through a scientific function if that is where a learner's needs and interests lie. Admittedly, we may have to simplify the scientific (or geographical, historical etc) text, but since in ESP any text is automatically removed from its original context, there can be no such thing as an authentic text in ESP anyway. As Hutchinson and Waters (1987 p159) say,

"we should be looking not for some abstract concept of 'authenticity', but rather the practical concept of 'fitness to the learning process'".

My preferred ELT model, therefore, for students such as those in Brunei, whose needs are strictly limited and thus more easily defined, is something like this:

School ..... Tertiary / Work
ESP1 ... + ESP2 ... + ESP3 ...etc ..... General English

Fig.2

That is, the students' General English (and how 'general' that is depends on their needs) is the **cumulative** result of the various specific purposes they have needed English for.

I accept that in a place like Singapore - where English **is** an inter-ethnic language, where there is a lot of Singaporean-Non Singaporean contact, where, in short, English is used extensively out of the classroom as a *lingua franca* - it may be less possible to define the students' needs as precisely as in, say, Brunei.

Nevertheless, some of the same argument apply. We still do not want a gap between General English and ESP, as exemplified in Fig.1. We should be aiming to narrow the language down as soon as the students' own ambitions and academic choices define themselves. Thus we may have a model like this:

Primary ... Lower Secondary ... Upper Secondary ... Tertiary ... Work
General English ... English Across Curriculum ... EAP ... ESP

Fig.3

That is, an EAC - EAP - ESP **continuum**. The earlier we can target language, in school, as students make their subject choices, then the less likely is the need for the sorts of 'repairs' I have described at sixth form level, or indeed for so much 'gap plugging' by EOP courses which, with their tendency to be short and intensive, are in danger of providing too little too late.

APPENDIX

Questionnaire - Results

1. Where do you need/use most English ? (Choose only **ONE** answer)
   (a) In school 84.5%
   (b) Out of school 15.5%

2. **In** school, do you need English
   (a) a lot 31.0%
   (b) quite a lot 55.2%
   (c) not much 13.8%
   (d) not at all 0

3. **In** school,what English do you need most in your lessons?
   (a) Listening (Understanding what the teacher says) 55.2%
   (b) Speaking (To the teacher) 17.2%
   (c) Reading (about your subject) 10.4%
   (d) Writing (about your subject) 17.2%

4. **Out** of school, do you need English
   (a) a lot 6.9%
   (b) quite a lot 25.9%
   (c) not much 56.9%
   (d) not at all 10.3%

5. **Out** of school, what English do you use most:

   (a) Reading. 53.4%
   (b) Writing. 0
   (c) Listening. 20.7%
   (d) Speaking. 25.9%

Number these sentences 1 (most important), 2, 3 (not important)

6. I am studying English because
   (a) It will help me get a good job 1=: 33.3%, 1: 15.8%, 2: 45.6%, 3: 5.3%

   (b) It will help me pass my school exams 1=: 33.3%, 1: 45.6% 2: 15.8%, 3: 5.3%

   (c) It will help me get to know English people better. 1: 5.3%, 2: 5.3% 3: 89.5%

Answer these questions.

7. I find studying English
   (a) more interesting than other subjects 24.6%
   (b) the same as other subjects 75.4%
   (c) more boring than other subjects 0

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