

Collaborative Instructors and Mixed Learners: An English for Specific Purposes Teaching Model in China

LES INSTRUCTEURS ET LES APPRENANTS DE COLLABORATION MIXTES: UN MODELE DE PROPOSITION SPECIFIQUE D'ENSEIGNEMENT DE L'ANGLAIS EN CHINE

ZHANG Jianchang^{1,*}

¹School of Humanities and Foreign Languages, Xi'an University of Science and Technology, Xi'an, Shaanxi, China

*Corresponding author.

Address: School of Humanities and Foreign Languages, Xi'an University of Science and Technology, Lintong, Xi'an, Shaanxi, China
Email: jzhjustin@gmail.com

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Abstract

In China, although great importance is attached to the acquisition of English language skills, problems remain, ranging from those of learners to those of instructors, particularly in the field of English for Specific Purposes. The paper analyses the current situation from the aspects of all parties involved, and proposes, based upon a learners' needs assessment, a teaching model where instructors skilled in the teaching of the English language, and instructors skilled in specific subject matter collaborate and where students of both English and non-English majors are mixed in class. The model benefits non-English majors in terms of utility of English acquisition and English majors in terms of specialization. At the same time, the language instructors and subject matter specialists also benefit because of the cross-training that occurs.

Key words: ESP teaching; Collaborative instructors; Mixed students; A teaching model

Résumé

En Chine, bien que la grande importance est attachée à l'acquisition de compétences linguistiques d'anglais, des problèmes demeurent, allant de ceux des apprenants à ceux des instructeurs, en particulier dans le domaine de l'Anglais à des fins spécifiques. Le document analyse la situation actuelle des aspects de toutes les parties

concernées, et propose, basé sur l'évaluation d'un besoins des apprenants, un modèle d'enseignement où des instructeurs qualifiés dans l'enseignement de la langue anglaise, et des instructeurs qualifiés dans un sujet spécifique collaborer et où les étudiants des deux majors anglais et non en anglais sont mélangés dans la classe. Le modèle des avantages non-anglais majors en termes d'utilité de l'acquisition de l'anglais et les majors en anglais en termes de spécialisation. Dans le même temps, les professeurs de langue et de spécialistes en la matière également bénéficier en raison de la formation croisée qui survient.

Mots clés: Enseignement d'ESP; Les instructeurs de collaboration; Les étudiants mixte; Un modèle d'enseignement

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The critical role of the English language in the present world leads to the situation where great importance is attached to the acquisition of the English language in China. In China, English language instruction starts in primary school when the students are at the age of around eight, and the class continues through middle school and into college. There, courses of College English are provided to all non-English majors, five hours a week, last for four semesters, and focus on basic skills such as reading, writing, listening and speaking. For English majors, there are more specific courses like Intensive Reading, Extensive Reading, Listening, Speaking, English Literature, and so on. However, the education has not effectively provided students with the ability required by the society in this regard. Based on the analysis of the nature and some central issues on English for Specific

Purposes (ESP), the paper proposes a model of English teaching and learning to improve the situation.

1. CURRENT SITUATION OF ENGLISH TEACHING AND LEARNING IN CHINA

In a research conducted by Cai, Wang, Pang and Xue (2010:9), a survey indicated that “82.5% of the students surveyed say that they are unable to use English efficiently in their own field even if they have passed CET-4/CET-6 [College English Test, band 4 and 6]. Ninety point eight percent of the students claim that they still need to learn English after they have passed the CET-4/CET-6. And 72.5% believe that learning medical English also can help them pass CET-4/CET-6.” On average, thus, students are still not proficient in this language after CET-4/CET-6.

In their third year, all non-English majors have their subject-specific course – English for Specific Purposes (ESP). For example, students majoring in Material Engineering have their own English course in this field and students majoring in Geology have their ESP class. However, “their [students’] ability to use the language in their own field is far from satisfactory” (Wang, 2006, p. 90); “... college students in China often lack sufficient English language skills though most of them start to learn English in primary school” (Wang, 2007, p. 123). The expectation in this class has so far not been met for several reasons. First, the previous two years of English learning have not laid a solid foundation. Second, the ESP teachers, usually specialized subject experts, have not been trained in the methods of language teaching. The major teaching approach is Grammar-translation, which focuses on the analysis of English sentences in terms of grammar and then translates them into Chinese. It is teacher-centered and students are passive in class. Consequently, the English that students learn is an ossified language, and, thus, they are unable to discuss the work-related matters in English on which they spend much time (Wang, 2007, p. 123). Last, but not the least, the teaching materials are not satisfactory in terms of the balance between language learning and subject learning.

With the policy of building comprehensive universities in China, the English program is available in most universities at present, and the majority of English majors are specialized in the English language and literature. However, the fact is “that all trades and professions need composite talents who have not only a good grasp of English skills, but also a conscious command of professional knowledge” (Wang, 2007, p. 121). This is especially true since “Eighty-five percent of all information in science and engineering in worldwide informational storage and retrieval networks is in English” (Grabe and Kaplan, 1986; Zengin, Erdogan and Akalin, 2007). Non-specialized English majors, therefore, are faced with the difficulty of unemployment upon

graduation.

An issue related to the instruction of specialized English impacts academic professionals, and the ever-increasing need of Chinese scholars and specialists to publish in international journals, the majority of which are published in English. Unless Chinese specialists have strong English-language skills, they cannot publish their works. So, quite naturally, they turn to – teachers of English. While proficient in English, however, without knowledge in the scholar’s specialized field, English teachers cannot translate such works effectively, either. Once again, the need for cross-training appears, and remains to be solved. The matter is of some importance, since it can hinder not only the personal achievement of scholars, but also global development and information exchange.

Based on the current situation, this paper probes into its root and attempts to propose a model from which all parties involved can benefit:

- ESP teachers can be trained
- Non-English majors improve their motivation in learning English and ultimately become proficient in the language
- English majors become specialized in a certain field so that they become advantageous in job market
- Good translators in science and technology can be trained.

2. DEVELOPMENT OF ESP

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is a movement based on the proposition that all language teaching should be tailored to the specific learning and language use needs of identified groups of students – and also sensitive to the socio-cultural contexts in which these students will be using English. Most of the movement’s practitioners are teachers of adults, those students whose needs are more readily identified within academic, occupational, or professional settings (Johns and Price-Machado, 2001, p. 43).

ESP was proposed in contrast with EGP – English for General Purposes – which is a part of liberal education at school and the main content of which is the language knowledge and skills like reading, writing, speaking and talking. The purpose is that students can get a general idea of the English language and can use it in daily life. As Chien, Lee and Kao (2008, p. 115-116) put it “... the education of English for EGP aims at facilitating English learners to achieve English proficiency for general communication purposes; whereas, ESP is well known as using a learner-centered and content/context-based approach. This primarily involves professional and practical English, studied to meet learners’ specific needs in utilizing English in their specific fields such as science and technology.” In China, the English teaching and learning from primary school to the first two years in

college is EGP.

However, with the development of the society, the education of EGP in China cannot meet the demand of the world. In Wang's opinion (2007, p. 127), "General English is not enough to communicate throughout the world as far as technology is concerned. Developing ESP courses in the Chinese context is necessary if we really want to be involved in the international community". Xie (2008, p. 2) describes in his book *Functional Context and ESP Discourse Translation*, after World War II, the scientific, technological and economic activities around the whole world increased dramatically and globalization became increasingly important. In this case, an "international" language was required. This role went to English because of the economic power of the USA after the war. Thus, learning English is not only for the purpose of appreciating English literature, but to promote the exchange of scientific and economic developments around the whole world.

The beginning of ESP is generally accepted as 1962, as established by John Swales and "the republication of Barber's article 'Some Measurable Characteristics of Modern Scientific Prose'" (1985, p. x). The reason is that: "First, it was a clear demonstration that the descriptive techniques of Modern Linguistics ... could be successfully applied to the language of science and technology. Secondly, the useful statistical information it contained provided ammunition for those EST [English for Science and Technology] teachers trying to convince their colleagues and superiors in Departments of English that 'Scientific English' was different from 'General English' or 'Literary English' in ways other than its use of technical or specialized vocabulary" (Swales, 1985, p. 1).

From then, ESP has experienced four stages in development and now is in the fifth stage (Xie, 2008, p. 7).

The first stage focuses on register analysis. "Register is defined as 'variation according to use': that is, we typically use certain recognizable configurations of linguistic resources in certain contexts" (Thompson, 2000:36). The research in this stage shows, on the one hand, that there are substantial differences between ESP and EGP in terms of sentence types and length, forms of verbs, tenses, and so on, but on the other hand, that from whatever aspect, ESP does not go beyond the general framework of the English language (Xie, 2008, p. 8).

Rhetorical or discourse analysis is the second stage. Importance here is attached to the composition of paragraphs and discourses. It sheds light on the teaching of ESP, but "...there is still a big gap between teaching and learners' needs" (Xie, 2008, p. 9).

The third stage is target situation analysis, which is also called needs analysis. That is the starting point and the central position of ESP. The representative scholar of this stage is John Mundy. In his *Communicative Syllabus Design* (1978), he proposed a detailed procedure to analyze learners' needs.

The fourth stage centers on skills and strategies analysis, with the focus shifting from the language surface to a deeper form – the thinking process in language use. The guidance in this case is that the same process of thinking and interpretation is shared in the use of any language (Xie, 2008, p. 10). In addition, the feature that ESP serves for specific purposes leads scholars to argue whether subject knowledge is needed for ESP teachers.

The present (fifth) stage is the learning-centered approach. This approach rests on the belief that learning takes place in a certain environment. It is emphasized that, on the one hand, students are the subject of learning, and on the other hand, that the learning environment is also important. With the internal cause and external one together, importance should be attached to the requirement of the society for students and their needs as well as the teaching itself.

In 1988, Peter Strevens provided the following widely-accepted features of ESP (Celce-Murcia, 2001, p. 44). ESP consists of English language teaching which is:

- Designed to meet the specified needs of the learner
- Related in content (i.e., in its themes and topics) to particular disciplines, occupations and activities
- Centered on the language appropriate to those activities in syntax, lexis, discourse, semantics, and in the analysis of this discourse
- In contrast to "General English."

3. CENTRAL ISSUES CONCERNING ESP

First, who should be considered as qualified ESP teachers, the language teachers or the subject teachers? Some people argue for the former and some argue for the latter. Chris Kennedy (1983, p. 74) described the status of ESP teachers as being in a "delicate position on the bridge between language and content".

Cai Yu and other researchers (2010, p. 10) conducted a study research of the teaching of medical English and believe that "...medical English teaching is still language teaching. ... Therefore, it is still the job of language teachers" and "It is highly required that language teachers working at medical colleges or universities learn some medical knowledge to serve medical students effectively". Tabatabaei (2007, p. 85) believed there existed "sufficient rationale to justify the position of a language teacher inside an ESP classroom."

However, Barber holds the view that teaching specialized technical terms falls neither within the responsibility, nor the competence of, the English teacher (Swales, 1985:17). Wu and Badger (2009, p. 19) even conducted a research, analyzing how English teachers "respond to unpredicted in-class situations where their subject knowledge is limited – what we call 'In-class Subject Knowledge Dilemma' (ISKD)".

In practice, currently ESP teachers in China are mainly subject teachers who teach and research in their

specialized fields and whose English proficiency is relatively high.

Let us see the learners' attitude toward this issue. In the same research conducted by Cai Yu and others (2010, p. 9-10), questionnaires were created to ask for students' opinions and the result is: 61.7% say "medical teachers" and 38.3% stand by "English teachers".

The debate never stops and another way has been proposed: The collaboration of the two types of teachers. Johns and Dudley-Evans (1980) found team-teaching extremely useful in their study. Shao (1992) also claimed that the cooperation in teaching between the two types of instructors is important.

It is widely accepted that the two parties should cooperate, but what is the specific way? One way that has been proposed is that the same ESP course is taught by two different teachers in the same semester and they teach in staggered hours. This way solves the problem to a great degree, but the profit is not maximized because "on the spot" technical problems in either direction cannot be readily solved during class and the ESP teachers are not cross-trained.

Second, ESP is generally for students majoring in some specific area except English. Only a few universities have attempted to provide it for English majors, with the limited "specific purposes" in social science like economics and business. In fact, English majors should be given the opportunities to develop language skills appropriate to a certain area within the important fields of science and technology based on their own interests and the strengths of the university. The Chinese society needs those who can study and appreciate English literature, but many more people with English skills are wanted in various industries. Specialization of English majors is a correct way to reach the balance of demand and supply in that field of the job market.

4. NEEDS ASSESSMENT AND THE PROPOSED MODEL

From the previous discussion about the definition, development and features of ESP, it is evident that learners' needs are critical to effective teaching and learning. It is widely recognized by researchers. For example, Cunningsworth (2002) claims that what distinguishes ESP courses from general English ones lies in the fact that ESP is goal-oriented and based on the awareness of learners' needs. Bloor and Bloor (1986) also believe that the goals of ESP courses are more likely to be achieved as long as learners' needs are satisfied. Therefore, the first thing to do for the ESP course is to assess the learners' needs. There are several reasons why this should be done.

First, for non-English majors – those who major in any subject other than English – English proficiency is

increasingly necessary for them these days. As specialized experts in their fields, their expertise can be better exerted if they can use English well in their work, such as consulting English materials, communicating with foreign experts, or having their findings published in international journals. In addition, English proficiency is a critical factor in their employment upon graduation. Anyway, non-English majors long to improve their English skills in their specialized field.

Second, English majors are not given enough attention in this aspect because traditionally ESP is for non-English majors. However, with the expansion of college enrollment in China and the policy of building comprehensive universities, the number of English majors has mushroomed. The severe situation is that they are faced with the difficulty of unemployment upon graduation because the society does not need so many people majoring solely in this language or in English. The opportunities of becoming specialized should be provided to the learners, particularly when the universities have those different programs available.

Third, the teachers' needs should also be taken into consideration. Subject experts serving as ESP teachers are just as eager to improve their language skills as are the non-English majors so that they can be exposed to a wider range of information and can have their achievements exposed to the whole world. For English teachers, meanwhile, frequently long to become specialized so that they, themselves, can not only meet the demands of society and the marketplace, but also teach students to meet those demands as well.

Last but not the least, the presently difficult task of specialized translation can be shouldered properly with the successful arrangement of ESP teaching. Translation concerns the transfer of meaning from one language to another. On the one hand, it directly involves languages so the translator should be good at them. On the other hand, the essence of the process is the conveyance of meaning. In order to fully understand the meaning being communicated, the translator has to understand the context so that the specific meaning can be grasped and conveyed accurately. In short, both subject and English teachers need to accomplish the task of translation and the way is ESP teaching.

It can be concluded from the first stage of ESP development that ESP is different from EGP. Besides, "A college English program is a prerequisite for ESP courses" (Wang, 2007, p. 127), so ESP is also based on EGP. The features of ESP also prove that it is categorized into the language teaching but is closely related to a specific discipline. Therefore, it is safe to say that ESP requires the collaboration of both subject and English teachers. Vocabulary teaching may be taken as an example to illustrate the point.

When learning a word, the learner is learning several

facets of the word. In terms of morphology, he learns its spelling; in terms of phonology, he learns its pronunciation; in terms of semantics, he learns its meaning; in terms of pragmatics, he learns its usage in a specific context. Without any background knowledge, there is still no problem to learn the spelling and pronunciation of a word, but it is quite difficult, even impossible, to grasp the essential meaning and use of a word in a certain context. For example, without the knowledge of “computer,” one cannot have a clear understanding of the word “server”; the meaning of the word “goaf” is not accessible without the background knowledge of mining.

That is the example of the word learning. The same principle applies to phrases and sentences, too. In short, a language, as the signifier, cannot be easily understood when the reader or listener lacks the necessary knowledge about the signified.

Therefore, for ESP, the collaboration between the subject teacher and English teacher is essential, with one focusing on language issues and the other on subject ones. Both aspects are for the thorough understanding of the discourse. “We believe that knowing the vocabulary in the professional field is not a sufficient condition for successful reading of specialized material; it is the non-technical vocabulary which causes more of a problem for EFL learners” (Cohen et al., 1979). At the same time, “For a specialized article, the largest information carrier is from technical terms instead of general ones” (Fan, 1995).

The collaboration is reflected in the whole process of teaching. Before class, the instructors should discuss the teaching materials and curriculum so that the key issues of the English language and the key points in the subject matter can be balanced. In the classroom, both teachers should be present, with one “on-stage” teaching and the other seated among students. They take turns on-stage based on the focus of a specific class plan. The co-instructor should always be present because it is also his opportunity to learn. In the long run, the independent ESP teachers and qualified translators can be cross-trained in this way. After class, they should also work together to do the evaluation for further development.

“Mixed students” here refers to the situation where the learners in the same classroom include both English majors and the majors in a specialized field. Since “ESP work is often designed for learners who have already begun to study English and are at an intermediate or even advanced level” (Dudley-Evens, 1998), the students should be senior students in college. Thus, non-English majors have laid a foundation for their subject matter and English majors have a relatively good proficiency in English and choose a certain field to be specialized in based on their interest. Then, the question immediately arising is how students in different disciplines can learn together. The key is what they are supposed to learn – the teaching content.

From the needs assessment we know that non-

English majors need the skills of the English language while English majors need specialized knowledge. Their needs determine what they should learn in the ESP class. Because students in each of these two groups bring only a limited knowledge of the other’s specialty, the instruction can only be within the most basic knowledge in that given area, as in *Introduction to XXX*, (where XXX refers to the specific area). It should be simple, basic but – at the same time – comprehensive and systematic, so as to give learners a global view of the discipline in question. The purpose of the ESP course is not for the subject (non-English) students to study the most complicated or latest developments of their field, but to improve their English skills. In this way, non-English majors can focus on English issues because the subject matter within the major is already familiar to them.

For English majors, the specialized content is an introduction to the specialized subject matter, particularly about the engineering subjects. With their relatively better language proficiency, however, they are likely to easily gain a fundamental understanding of the subject matter. All the English majors can choose a particular subject based on their interest and the availability of the program in the university. In this way, they are not only able to be specialized in a field, but also are able to further improve their English skills.

The mixed way also promotes learners’ motivation. Many researchers have claimed that motivation enhances second/foreign language acquisition (Liu, 2007, p. 127). With the current stage of ESP development characterized by the central position of learners, more attention should be paid to the enhancement of learners’ motivation.

Gardner and Lambert (1972) categorize motivation as instrumental motivation and integrative motivation. Instrumental motivation refers to the learning desire caused by external factors, such as examinations, employment, and so on. Integrative motivation refers to the learning desire from inside of the learner to learn a foreign language to communicate. For both English and non-English majors, their instrumental motivation is clear, as analyzed in the part of needs assessment. In her research about Chinese college students’ motivation to learn English, Liu (2007) also found that Chinese students “were more instrumentally than integratively motivated to learn English”. The mixed approach is supposed to greatly enhance the learners’ integrative motivation.

The current learners-centered stage of ESP means learners are active in class. They discuss with their teachers as well as their peers; they do presentations. With their respective strengths, both English and non-English majors have the willingness and confidence to share their strengths with the other party. Thus, a better in-class environment is created, which is also an important element of the learner-centered approach to teaching. With the desire to communicate aroused and an effective learning environment created, learners’ integrative

motivation is enhanced.

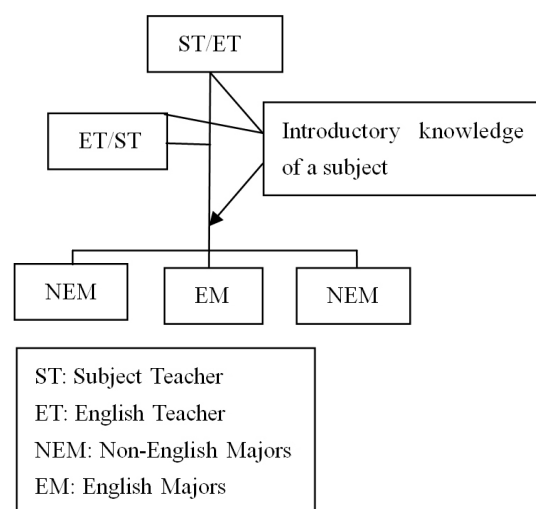


Figure 1
The ESP Teaching Model

The program is for students in Grade Three in college, as it is being done in China now.

The subject teacher is still the person who is doing the job for their interest and English proficiency. The English teacher should come from the Department of English, and be interested in a certain specialized field. The two teachers collaborate in all the teaching procedures. Particularly in class, both teachers are present although each class has a specific focus. As noted previously, there are two main reasons for having each teacher present at all times. For one reason, both the subject matter issues and language issues can be solved on-the-spot. For another, this way of teaching also serves the purpose of training of ESP instructors and qualified translators. In this sense, the teacher who sits among students in a class has double status: as a teacher and as a student.

For students, non-English majors attend a class based in part upon their specific major, as is usually done. For English majors, the students are to be divided into different groups which are based on the available programs of the college. The division of the students depends upon students' choices based on their interests.

The teaching content is the introductory knowledge of the certain discipline so that the learners can have a good balance of their strengths and weaknesses. The learners are more motivated and learn from each other because of their respective advantages.

CONCLUSION

Based on the development and features of ESP, this study addresses the central issues in the field and sets up a model of ESP teaching characterized by collaborative instructors and mixed students to meet the needs of all the parties involved. The instructors can learn from each other

and they are likely to become not only independent ESP instructors in the future, but also efficient translators in a specific field. Non-English majors can better improve their English skills. The composite quality will greatly benefit them in their academic pursuit and workplace. While further improving their English skills, English majors can become specialized and become competitive in the job market.

Based on this theoretical model, an empirical experiment could be conducted to provide concrete data. In addition, research in other factors involved in ESP teaching could be pursued to improve it even more comprehensively.

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