Teaching English for Specific Purposes: Practice

MAKOTO SHISHIDO*

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I. Introduction

English for specific purposes (ESP) first appeared on the general language teaching scene in the mid-to late 1980s. ESP had assumed global dimensions by the mid-1990s and the demand for ESP continues to increase and expand throughout the world. In my previous paper (Shishido, 1999), I introduced the modern history of ESP and a standard definition of ESP. I then discussed the distinguishing characteristics of the movement — needs analysis and discourse analysis — that have set it apart from "general purpose English." Some practical and essential issues in designing ESP courses were also presented. In this paper, I briefly discuss the theoretical background for designing ESP courses. Then, based on the theory, I introduce two sample lessons that I have been using in the freshmen English Writing class at Juntendo University School of Medicine.

II. Theoretical Background for Designing ESP Courses

ESP requires the careful research and design of pedagogical materials and activities for an identifiable group of adult learners within a specific learning context. In any English as a second language or English as a foreign language (ESL/EFL) class, there is a tension between teaching language skills and teaching academic subject content. Having rejected the grammatical syllabus and the study of language as form, the profession has gone on, through a series of needs analysis, to teach the use of language in the communicative settings that students are most likely to encounter. As a result, academically oriented ESL/EFL classes now outwardly resemble other subject classrooms in the types of language activity the students are asked to perform.

Yet the ESL/EFL syllabus is still primarily a language syllabus. As language teachers, we are generally less concerned that our students master specific subject content than we are that they attain a certain level of language proficiency. The content is interesting only insofar as it can be used for the performance of communicative tasks. At this point we need to raise a general question in course design: Is the choice of content for language courses really of little consequence as long as the learners are involved in language practice that is appropriate to their skill level?

No matter how we design courses, the tension between content and language skills does not disappear. Students sense the importance of content in the academic lectures and text. Accordingly,
they may be much more interested in using the ESL/EFL study skills hour to review academic content than engage in skill-building activities which do not seem to offer an immediate reward.

The ESL/EFL instructors must resist pressure to dwell only on content. They may plan a lesson on understanding vocabulary from context and find instead they are repeating some academic lectures, in simplified form. Digressions like this endanger the authenticity of the course, as a non-specialists’ simplifications of the lectures often distort course content. The ultimate sources of authority are the text and the professor, and the ESL/EFL teacher’s role is to teach students to get the information they need from these sources.

The syllabus for the ESP course claims that “at the end of the course, students will have better skills for academic work and will be able to use these skills in all their academic subjects.” The language improvement goal for writing skill is given: composition tasks work on the ability to summarize and paraphrase information, to synthesize information from a variety of sources, to apply previously learned concepts to new situations, and to write short answers to essay test items under time pressure.

Based on what I have discussed in this section, I developed two ESP lessons for an English writing class and an oral English class at Juntendo University School of Medicine. Both projects can be adapted to feature either writing or oral aspects more or less, depending on teacher/students needs. I will introduce them in the next section.

III. Sample Lessons

1. Danger in Electric Lines — EMF

This activity is designed for medical students to learn about the invisible health dangers of electromagnetic fields (EMF) and to investigate other unknown health dangers. They acquire, through this activity, the skills for listening, note-taking and summarizing skills while watching a video on EMF. Watching the video, students come to understand the dangerous effect of EMF on human health. They learn how to take notes, summarize and comment on the video. They are required to do library and Internet research. Finally they improve their essay writing skills.

Procedure:

1. Before the class, the TV program on electromagnetic fields (EMF), produced by an American TV station, should be dubbed through the caption reading machine, FA-710, so that the caption can be openly shown on the TV monitor while playing the video.
   • Captions may help students understand the content of the video and facilitate the taking of notes while watching.
   • More details about the closed captioned video and how to prepare it are discussed in Shishido (1998a).
2. Make some guiding materials which will help students take notes while watching the video and summarize the important issues about EMF after watching (as shown in the Appendix, Activity 1 and Activity 2).
3. In the class, first of all, introduce the subject, “Invisible health dangers of EMF,” since students do not have the previous knowledge about it.
4. Pass around the printed guiding materials prepared in step 2.
5. Explain that students need to take notes while watching the video and summarize the impor-
tant issues after watching.

6. Have the students watch the video.
   • Be sure to show short sequences.
   • Allow for repeated viewing.
   • Explain some important issues in Japanese if necessary, particularly for the technical terms.
   • Through this activity students build up their listening skills.

7. Using the “pause” button on VCR, give them enough time to write down the captions which appear on the TV monitor for the note-taking activity, Activity 1.

8. Ask students to answer the questions in Activity 2 and summarize the important issues in the video.

9. Have them fill out the chart in Activity 2. They can gain note-taking and summarizing abilities through these activities.

10. Ask students several questions about what they have understood from watching the video.

11. Allow them to ask questions about points they do not understand in the video.

12. Ask them to do library and Internet research to find out more about EMF.

13. Using the textbook, Blanton (1993), have students read a sample essay and understand the “deduction” logic.
   • Follow the exercises and activities in the textbook.
   • Using the previously introduced writing techniques in the textbook, explain what and how they have to write.
   • Have them write an outline for the essay.

14. Have them write their essay at home.

15. Have them bring their essays to class the following week.

16. Using the Peer Response Sheet, introduced in Shishido (1998b), have students read another student essay and fill in the sheet. This step is particularly helpful for encouraging students to clarify their understanding and check other students’ misunderstanding about EMF.

17. Ask students to revise their essays according to the comments on the peer response sheet.

Caveats and Options:

1. This activity takes two to three 90 minutes classes. Class time can be saved if it is done in only two classes: one for the first part of the activity, watching the video, and the second for writing an essay.

2. To reduce class time, the topic could also be altered. If the topic of EMF is somehow difficult or unfamiliar to the students, other health dangers or recent concerns about health could be the topic.

3. In case there is no appropriate video for any health concern, reading materials could be used as a substitution.

4. For an oral English class, oral presentations can be adapted as a substitution for the writing activity. Steps 13 to 17 can be adjusted accordingly.

2. Facts about AIDS

Through this activity, students reach an understanding of AIDS by building on their existing knowledge and clearing up misunderstandings and prejudices. Beyond this, they learn how to co-
operate with others by planning, organizing and working on a group research project. They also acquire presentation skills in English.

**Procedure:**

1. Have the students write down everything they know about AIDS. Then ask them to write down questions they have about AIDS, or aspects of the AIDS issue they are interested in finding out more about.
2. Have the students form pairs and exchange the information they have written down. If time allows, have two pairs join to form groups of four and, once again, exchange information and ideas.
3. After allowing suitable time for discussion, have the groups first report on what they know about AIDS. Do not comment on the accuracy of their knowledge at this time. Any misunderstandings and inaccuracies will be cleared up during the subsequent investigations.
4. Go through the questions they have about AIDS, and write them on the blackboard, or have one member from each group write the group's questions on the blackboard. Once all the ideas are written down, group them into general categories, such as medical, history, prevention, prejudice and statistics.
5. Tell the students to choose the topic that most interests them and join classmates with the same interest in a research investigation.
   - Let the group form naturally; do not force the students into groups (although it may sometimes be necessary to balance the groups).
   - Keep the size of each group between three and six members. If more than six students choose the same topic, split them into two groups.
   - If you wish, have the students write their names on the blackboard under the topic they are interested in, or designate various areas of the room as topic areas in order to expedite group formation.
6. Outline the group investigation process. Explain that the students are to
   - plan how they will investigate their topic
   - carry out the investigation
   - plan how they will present the information to the class
   - make their presentation
   Ensure that all the groups understand the process, especially if it is their first investigation.
7. Have each group summarize the planned investigation on paper, including who will do what and when, and hand it in to you. Use the summaries to make sure groups stay on target and to anticipate possible problems.
8. In the following lessons, bring to class books, pamphlets, movies or videos, and other material on AIDS appropriate for the students' level. Have the students conduct their research and organize their presentations.
   - Encourage the students to be as creative as possible with their presentations so that the information has the greatest impact on the audience. Possible forms of presentation are an interactive speech, a self-published book, a play, or a video.
   - Because of the serious nature of the topic, be careful at this stage that the students' information is as accurate as possible.
9. Once all the groups have finished their presentations, lead a class discussion on what they have learned and, perhaps as important, how it was learned. Point out that the investigation
process is applicable not only to the classroom but in daily life as well, and illustrate with some simple examples, such as investigating airline ticket prices or finding suitable entertainment for an upcoming party.

**Caveats and Options:**

1. This type of studying and learning might be new, and therefore difficult, for many students. If the teacher feels that your students might have trouble working with the topic of AIDS, do a group investigation with a less complex topic or with one that is more familiar to the students. Once they are comfortable with the process, move on to the investigation of AIDS.

2. Another aspect of this activity that often causes problems is the sudden change in the teacher's role. The students may find it difficult to adjust to self-directed learning, especially if they are used to treating the teacher as a fount of wisdom. Resist the temptation to do more than guide the students to find answers themselves. Instead of providing answers to the students' questions, respond by suggesting where or how they can find the answer.

3. To shorten the process, eliminate steps 1-3 of the Procedure. Instead, give the students some general background material on AIDS and then give them the general categories. The groups' first step would be to list several questions that will help them investigate their assigned topic.

4. This project can be adapted for an English writing class if steps 8 and 9 are adjusted in the same procedures as steps 13-17 in the EMF project.

**IV. Conclusion**

Teachers who would like to try ESP activities, first of all, should investigate what English abilities and content knowledge the students would need by using the need analysis. Language teachers do not necessarily have as much specific knowledge about the content areas and health issues as experts and medical doctors. Therefore, it may be necessary for the teacher to do some investigation of the topic before beginning the project. Copies of relevant material can, in turn, be passed on to students to aids in their research. With relevant material concerning recent health and medical topics and the ESP lesson procedures introduced here, students' abilities of oral and written communication can be efficiently improved. That is the goal of these projects and successful ESP for medical students.

**APPENDIX**

**EMF — Danger in Our Electric Lines ?**

**Activity 1 — Watching video and taking notes**

*Answer these questions in English while you are watching the video.*

1. What does EMF stand for? What is EMF?
2. What happened near a substation in Scranton, Pennsylvania?
3. How does EMF affect human health?
4. What levels of EMF are said to increase the risk of developing cancer?
5. What did Dr. Carpenter find after 10 years of his study?
6. What does the power industry say about the effects of EMF?
7. What does Dr. Ross Adey find in his research on the biotechnological effects of EMF?
8. What is the scientific conclusion, according to Dr. Baskin?
9. What conclusion has the Swedish study reached?
10. What did Prof. Ahlbom find in his study?
11. What did the Swedish government and the power companies do after the study was released?
12. What did the Bush administration do in regard to the EPA report?
13. What is the EPA’s position on EMF radiation?
14. What does the industry want to do about this issue?
15. What change did the utility company agree to make in Scranton?

### Activity 2 — Summarizing

*Fill in the blanks with appropriate English words and write your own opinion.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Suspect</th>
<th>EMF may be 1 ( ) to human health.</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Effect</td>
<td>EMF may promote 2 ( ) such as 3 ( ), 4 ( ) and 5 ( ).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How</td>
<td>EMF may promote 6 ( ) by 7 ( ) communication between cells and 8 ( ) up the 9 ( ) of 10 ( ) cells.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidence</td>
<td>Children living near 11 ( ) 12 ( ) had almost 13 ( ) times the normal risk of developing 14 ( ).</td>
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<th>The US</th>
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<td>Study on EMF’s effect on human health</td>
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<tr>
<td>Government reaction</td>
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<td>Electric Industry</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

Your comment, opinion, etc:

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*Shishido: Teaching English for Specific Purposes: Practice*
References

Nippon Veterinary and Animal Science University, 47. pp. 44～49.
43-Supplement, pp. 32～37.

[和文要約]

専門学習と連動した英語教育：実践編

近年の英語教育における新たな流行に、専門学習と連動した言語教育があげられる。宍戸の理論編
（1999）において、専門分野の学習内容と連動した英語教育を行うための理論的背景として、教授法の
定義、近年の傾向と特徴、分析方法について論じ、実践的な教授法のためのヒントを紹介した。この論
文では、その理論に基づき、現在実際に順天堂大学医学部一年生のEnglish Writingの講義で利用して
いる、医学部学生の専門学習内容や彼らの興味と呼応した、EMFやAIDSなどの話題を取り扱った、作文・発表指導法を紹介する。