24 LSP Theory and Second Language Acquisition

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Introduction

Since the early 1960s LSP research has been dominated by English for Special Purposes, as the increasing importance of English as an international language led to rapid growth in the demand for higher education through English, both at undergraduate and postgraduate level. This in turn created a huge international market for English language courses designed to prepare students to follow degree programmes, mostly in science and technology. The research produced in language teaching and learning for special purposes which resulted from this activity is in many ways ahead of research relating to the teaching of other languages to students or specialists in areas such as business, science and technology. In these circumstances it is natural that teachers and researchers in other languages should consult published ESP research with a view to applying it to their own activity. It is the aim of this study to investigate to what extent the research which has been carried out in ESP can be applied to the teaching of other languages for special purposes.

After a brief initial survey of the development of ESP research in the last three decades, the paper will compare the situation of ESP learners and students of other languages, particularly French and German, who are also following a language course intended to be relevant to their specialist studies. This will enable us to assess to what extent the large body of published ESP research can inform the work of those designing courses in other languages for special purposes. Clearly, in a brief study such as this, it is not possible to provide an exhaustive analysis of this important issue. The aim is rather to initiate debate on the subject, at a time when researchers in French and German are increasingly devoting attention to the use of the language by specialists in various fields.

The Development of ESP

Over 30 years ago, when researchers first began a systematic study of the type of language which scientists and students of science would require, quantitative lexicostatistical studies (Barber, 1962; Halliday, McIntosh & Strevens, 1964) not only provided information on specialist terminology but also indicated which syntactic structures occurred most frequently in scientific prose. This type of (English) research informed the design of ESP courses, but later researchers observed the limited relevance of such studies. For example, the discovery that the passive voice occurs much more frequently than the active in written scientific English does not mean that a course can omit the active voice, or that a non-native speaker can communicate effectively as a scientist without ever using it (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987: 31). Moreover, the use of authentic scientific prose in the ESP class could pose a major problem for the teacher or student who is not a specialist in the relevant discipline. Later studies question the need for advanced scientific texts to be included in the language course, stressing the usefulness of semi-technical texts on everyday technological products (Hutchinson & Waters, 1988: 181).

Alongside studies of the desirability of incorporating scientific texts in language classes, there is a significant body of research attempting to define the term 'Language for Special Purposes'. Some researchers in linguistics still maintain that there is no such thing as LSP, as it cannot be easily defined according to the criteria normally used to define a language. However, Sager, Dungworth & McDonald's (1980: 68) definition of LSP as 'specialist-to-specialist communication' is now generally accepted, although it is not always directly applicable to the situation of the language learner. Moreover, it has been pointed out that different levels of specialisation exist (Balboni, 1986: 6; Varantola, 1986: 11). The view that special language can exist at any stage from popularisation level to the highest level of knowledge of the subject is particularly relevant to the situation of language learners, who may initially be non-specialists both in the language and in the subject which they are studying. The practical application of this research is evident in the use of popularised texts on scientific subjects in many LSP courses. While the teachers may choose the texts intuitively rather than as a result of having read the relevant published work, they are nevertheless making available to learners texts which are pertinent to the subject which they are studying or intend to study.

However, the use of popularised texts such as journal articles is unlikely to provide students with examples of language use appropriate to their needs. Indeed the major influence on theory and practice in LSP has been the development of the communicative approach to language learning which,

together with developments in research in discourse analysis, has moved the focus of LSP courses away from written language to include spoken language as well, and, more particularly, has established the fundamental importance of the communicative character (Widdowson, 1979: 56) or the communicative purpose (Swales, 1990: 10) of what is said or written. Particularly relevant in this context is the definition of LSP as the language used by a particular discourse community, which Swales defines as a group of people with expertise in an area of activity, who share 'a broadly agreed set of common public goals, a specific lexis and accepted communicative practices or genres' (1990: 24). This concept provides a framework for the design and content of LSP courses, as well as mapping out a path for research in specialist language use. If the language teacher's role is to prepare learners for membership of a discourse community, then one of the researcher's functions is to identify the relevant discourse community and analyse its use of language.

It is at this point that it becomes evident how difficult it is to apply ESP research to the teaching of languages other than English to students of business, science and technology. For example, the recent expansion of such courses in French and German in British and Irish institutions of further and higher education is producing several categories of students who cannot easily be compared to the case studies used by researchers such as Sager *et al.*, Swales, Johns and Dudley-Evans, and many others. Firstly, ESP researchers have long enjoyed the benefit of huge numbers of learners whose needs can be precisely defined. A course may be designed to prepare prospective students for studies in medicine or plant biology, or to ensure that doctors who are non-native speakers of English can communicate effectively with patients. The prospective student, for example, clearly requires a course which will prepare him or her to understand lectures, read literature in the subject, write essays, communicate in tutorials, etc. In his highly regarded work on genre analysis and the discourse community, Swales (1990) provides a detailed study of the research article in English, and the relevance of this is obvious for the very large number of researchers who are non-native speakers of English and whose career advancement depends to a large extent on their ability to publish in English language journals. Clearly the increasing dominance of English as the international language of academic research makes it easy to understand why ESP research is characterised to a large extent by its focus on the use of scientific language in an academic setting.

LSP for English-speaking Students

In general the English-speaking student of science or business who chooses a programme including language study to degree level has needs

which are much more difficult to determine than those of the learners of English who have been the inspiration for the research which has been considered so far. Where the English courses were clearly a market-led development from the start, the inspiration for degree programmes combining the study of business or science with French and German came initially from groups of academics who decided that students in these disciplines should be offered the possibility of studying a language. The reasons which tend to be given in course documentation stress the importance of preparing the student to work abroad, to liaise with speakers of the language or to read research in the subject. The combinations of language and specialism which are chosen reflect economic or academic perceptions of the importance of a particular language for a particular economic benefit or area of study. For example, chemistry may be combined with German, reflecting the important position occupied by German research in that subject. Until very recently the only way to study Japanese throughout an undergraduate degree in Ireland was as a component of a degree programme in Business Studies or International Marketing, thus reflecting Ireland's interest in the Japanese economy as a destination for exports and a source of inward investment. In both these examples the language may be studied from beginning level, which limits the amount of time which can be devoted to meeting the perceived specialist needs of the students. Furthermore, individual students may have perceptions of their needs which do not conform strictly to the justification for the study of the language put forward by the course design team. They may be motivated by a desire to provide themselves with a professional qualification and at the same time to study the language of a country which they find interesting. In short, course designers cannot define student needs as easily as their counterparts in ESP, nor can they identify with certainty a discourse community in which their students will participate in the future.

As a result of this, LSP course design does not have the uniformity which one can observe in courses in English for Special Purposes or English for Academic Purposes. Without the studies of the precise needs of specific groups of learners which have appeared in ESP, courses tend to be an eclectic mix of the planner's or teacher's perception of what is required. At the less advanced levels of language learning, where a trainee may be prepared for work as a waiter or for communicating by telephone in a specific situation, it is clearly possible to identify the needs of a specific group and to design a course accordingly. Many such courses, certified by national and private organisations, exist already, and the momentum is growing to create a common European framework for language teaching and learning (Fitzpatrick, 1994). To meet the needs of these learners, published coursebooks in language for business or technology are increasing in number and in quality. These

vocationally oriented courses will no doubt provide useful language training for those requiring to work abroad or to communicate in other languages in a work-related context. However, they do not provide a framework for planning the language programme of students who wish to study language to a high level but whose precise needs, even if they could be established, would vary enormously.

Conclusion: Trends in ESP and LSP Research

This is not to say that the communicative purpose of the language learning cannot be determined at all in the specialised context of such programmes, or that the concept of the discourse community is totally irrelevant in this context. Students of electronic engineering and German, for example, may be studying the language for a number of reasons, which might include the knowledge that previous students in the subject have found employment in Germany or that German-owned companies in their own environment offer the possibility of employment. Moreover, it is not unlikely that such students will be given the possibility to study in Germany for a semester or a year. Two discourse communities can already be distinguished, namely that of students of electronic engineering and employees in electronic engineering companies. Both of these discourse communities can be seen as subdivisions of larger groups, namely students and companies. Thus the possible needs of the students can be divided into several categories: firstly, knowledge of student life in general in Germany and the ability to use the appropriate language; secondly, the specific language activities necessary to succeed in the study of the discipline; thirdly, language use in business generally; and finally the specific language likely to be used in the context of an electronic engineering company. It is clear from this example that the needs of the learners are less easily determined and less homogenous than those of non-English speakers who wish to follow a particular course of study or to communicate appropriately in a well defined discourse community. However, the model devised in the context of English language acquisition can still be applied with a high expectation that the broader focus of the course will be relevant to the future situations of the learners.

The example of the student of electronic engineering and German highlights another important and related area where ESP diverges significantly from other languages, namely in the treatment of the cultural component. Learners preparing for study in London or New York may well find that their course contains an element of British or American Studies. Increasingly however, ESP courses present English as an international language, as learners may have needs which do not involve communicating with English or

American people, or indeed with any native speakers of the language. The same is seldom true of LSP courses in other languages. The second largest French-speaking city in the world is Montréal, and the language is spoken in more than 40 countries, but the LSP course in a European context still focuses almost entirely on France, with perhaps a token gesture towards Belgium, Switzerland and other Francophone countries throughout the world. At present this seems to correspond to the needs of most learners, rather than representing a refusal to accept the reality of a post colonial world. In this case the situation noted earlier when comparing ESP with French and German for Special Purposes is reversed, in that the needs of learners of languages other than English can be more specifically defined as a preparation for intercultural communication.

It is interesting to note how, in the areas of research and course design, English and other languages, both influenced by an increasing awareness of the importance of needs analysis and of designing the course to meet the learners' needs, have moved in opposite directions. On the one hand English language courses have moved away from being essentially a preparation for life in an idealised England or America, as researchers and teachers discover the increasing irrelevance of such a focus. Many articles on the subject have a negative focus, stressing the need to avoid the temptation to use the language class as a means of producing stereotypical Americans or Southern English clones (Alptekin, 1993). Researchers are, of course, aware that all language teaching and learning is culture bound, even if a cultural element is not explicitly included in the syllabus. Moreover, it has been pointed out that even the teaching of scientific writing and methods of study and research to learners from radically different cultures is imposing cultural norms (Valdes, 1990: 26). However the removal of explicit cultural references from ESP course materials leads to the conclusion that the emphasis is on the international rather than the culturally specific dimension.

In the European languages, on the other hand, the developing focus on the specific needs of the learners, far from excluding an explicit cultural dimension, tends to emphasise its importance. Students of electronic engineering going to Germany are already members of the international category of students and as such will have much in common with German students. However, as language learners they will have special communicative needs of a sociocultural nature which are peculiar to the German context. Moreover, the vast majority of those learning German will be doing so in order to communicate with native speakers of the language, almost certainly of European origin. The importance of including a specific cultural component in LSP courses in European Languages thus presents a challenge of a totally different nature to the increasing internationalisation of English. The

specialist component must be included alongside the intercultural, as both are necessary if the learner is to fulfil the communicative purpose of the course. The definition of this explicit cultural component and its relationship to LSP are areas of research where the paths of research and teaching in English and other European languages are likely to diverge, and where, despite the increasing cultural relativism of language learning materials in languages other than English, cultural preparation for membership of a discourse community is likely to retain its importance. In this, as in the other points of comparison and contrast which have been observed, researchers in ESP and in other Languages for Special Purposes can benefit from each other's experience.

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