

A LOOK AT THE DEMOCRATIC PERSPECTIVES OF ESP

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ABSTRACT

With the increasing demand of specialized language the world over the importance of ESP clearly stands out. However, one wonders about the extent to which it contributes effectively to the improvement of life in our contemporary societies. My main concern is as follows: Given the specificity of ESP and considering the requirements of a democratizing world, how does one relate the teaching of ESP to the progress achieved in the field of democracy? In order to provide an answer to this question, I studied ESP in its own dynamics discussing the different orientations given to the ESP course and showing the extent to which these orientations suggest its democratic dimension. I first had a look at the professional and social dimensions of the ESP course. As a professionally oriented subject, ESP courses offer learners the opportunity to acquire some knowledge about the language which will allow them to perform in their specific field of interest. As a socially oriented subject, it reinforces the outstanding role of language to the extent that it makes language users more operational in their specific field of interest increasing at the same time the dynamism of society. I then focused on the democratic relevance of ESP. This democratic relevance falls into two points: The democratic relevance of the underlying rationale of ESP and the implementation of ESP in professional life as a contribution to a democratic society. I finally discussed the didactic implications of ESP as a means to the end of democracy showing the extent to which the practice of ESP in the classroom context prepares learners for their future roles in the democratic society that they will have to help construct, transform and improve.

Key words: ESP, democracy, democratic, society, didactics, language, English, specific, field.

RÉSUMÉ

Avec la demande croissante partout dans le monde dans le domaine de la langue de spécialité, l'importance de l'ESP est évidente. Cependant, on se demande dans quelle mesure elle contribue efficacement à l'amélioration de la vie dans nos sociétés contemporaines. Notre préoccupation essentielle est la suivante : Considérant la spécificité de l'ESP et compte tenu des exigences de la société démocratique, quel rapport y a-t-il entre l'enseignement de l'ESP et les progrès réalisés en matière de démocratie ? Pour répondre à cette question, nous avons étudié l'ESP dans sa dynamique

propre en discutant les différentes orientations données au cours d'ESP et en montrant comment ces orientations suggèrent sa dimension démocratique. Nous avons dans un premier temps jeté un regard sur les dimensions professionnelle et sociale du cours d'ESP. En tant que matière à orientation professionnelle, le cours d'ESP offre aux apprenants l'opportunité d'acquérir des connaissances sur les aspects de la langue qu'ils auront à utiliser dans leur domaine de spécialité. En tant que matière à orientation sociale, elle renforce l'importance du rôle de la langue, cela d'autant plus qu'elle rend les utilisateurs plus opérationnels dans leur domaine de spécialité augmentant ainsi le dynamisme de la société. Nous mettons ensuite l'accent sur la pertinence démocratique de l'ESP. Cette pertinence tient en deux points: La pertinence démocratique du principe qui soutend l'ESP et la mise en œuvre de l'ESP dans la vie professionnelle comme une contribution à la société démocratique. Nous discutons enfin les implications didactiques de l'ESP comme un moyen pour atteindre la fin de la démocratie en montrant comment la pratique de l'ESP dans nos classes forme les apprenants à assurer leurs futurs rôles dans la société démocratique qu'ils auront à construire, à transformer et à améliorer.

Mots clés: ESP, démocratie, démocratique, société, didactique, langue, anglais, spécialité, domaine.

INTRODUCTION

With the scientific and economic progress following the end of World War II there was a demand for an international language. As this role fell to English, many people the world over wanted to learn English, the key to the international currencies of technology and commerce. They needed English to operate in their specific field of interest. This led up to a revolution in linguistics (emergence of influential new ideas in the study of language) and a focus on the learner which resulted in the birth of ESP (English for Specific Purposes) in the early 1960s. The development of ESP brought about the emergence of some concepts, register analysis, rhetorical or discourse analysis, target situation analysis, skills and strategies, and learning centred approach. ESP has then become a reality that theorists in the field of English language education have to cope with. Despite its relevance, one wonders about the extent to which ESP contributes effectively to the improvement of life in our contemporary societies. My main concern is as follows: Given the specificity of ESP and considering the requirements of a democratizing world, how does one relate the teaching of ESP to the progress achieved in the field of democracy? In order to provide an answer to this question, I will study ESP in its own dynamics while analyzing its

implications for a democratic society. This article which consists of two main parts begins with an attempt to show the difference (if any) between general English and ESP and ends with a discussion of the democratic perspectives of ESP.

1. General English and ESP: Does it make a difference?

The issue of a fundamental difference between General English and ESP has been addressed in most if not all the reflections in the field. Despite some attempts to show the gap between General English and ESP, one still wonders about the extent to which one can really think of an ESP which stands on its own.

1.1. General English

General English is concerned with the teaching of the fundamentals of grammar, of expression as well as of phonetics. The learner has to learn it only because it is included in the general curriculum. The general English course aims at training learners to be able to use the English language to take part in interactions in their everyday life. As long as a learner is able to make his way through life using the English language to interact with other people in any context we assume that his training has been successful. General English has a more global view of the use of the language. Consequently, teachers and their learners are not expected to focus on particular contexts of language use.

1.2. ESP

Tom Hutchinson and Alan Waters (1987) define ESP as an approach rather than a product. For them, ESP is not concerned with a particular language, teaching material or methodology. It shows interest in learners, the language needed and the learning context. The stress is therefore on learners' needs, a concern that most theorists in the field, Strevens (1988) and Robinson (1991) among others, share. Moreover, as Dudley-Evans and St John (1998:4) indicate, 'ESP teaching does not necessarily have to be related to content but it should always reflect the underlying concepts and activities of the broad discipline.' That is where the notions of 'carrier content' and 'real content'¹ come into play. By 'carrier content' one should understand the context used as a vehicle for the 'real content'.

¹ The specific language that one wishes to introduce.

The specific needs that determine the teaching of ESP can be professional, occupational and social. A student in a medical school, for example, should be taught the kind of English he will need to operate in situations he is likely to find himself in at the hospital, at international conferences, and in many other contexts where the English language is needed to interact with people about issues concerning medical matters. Consequently, the training of such a student needs to take account of the specificity of the context in which he is likely to use the English language. The relevance of ESP clearly stands out though the issue of the nature of the link (if any) between ESP and General English has nourished some of the reflections in this field.

1.3. General English and ESP: Dependence or opposition

It is generally admitted that ESP entails specialized programmes designed to develop the communicative use of English in a specialized field. Programmes should therefore be speciality-oriented and purposeful with a focus on the predetermined needs of learners. In so doing, learners make use of English to acquire professional knowledge while learning the professional vocabulary and the grammar of the language itself through a participation in activities based on some selected texts about the specific field.

Although the acquisition of professional vocabulary and that of some language functions are encouraged in the context of ESP, one should admit that a great part of those professional vocabulary and language functions come from general English. I therefore share the view that ESP always rests on the knowledge of general English. Opposing ESP to general English would mean that the former could do without the latter. Experience teaches us that a good command of general English stands as the foundation for a successful training in ESP. ESP and general English cannot be opposed. They stand in a relation of dependence which makes general English a provider of ESP. With this development one now has a clear idea of what ESP represents and how relevant it is for the training of those people specializing in some fields.

2. ESP: A professionally oriented subject

Given the fact that ESP is concerned with specialized fields, one cannot but admit it is a professionally oriented subject. As such the need to focus on the extent to

which it serves a given field clearly stands out. The professional dimension of ESP is manifold. However, I'll choose to refer to the ones I find more relevant.

2.1. ESP: An agent of the development of learners' competence in their field

Language classes in general aim at developing learners' competence in the language. Courses therefore offer them the opportunity to acquire some knowledge about the language which will allow them to perform in different situations. As far as ESP is concerned, the knowledge learners are trained for directly relates to their field of interest. Unlike the training in the context of general English which provides a rather broad image of the English language by developing learners' competence in the language, ESP trains them to become competent in their field. ESP develops learners' cognitive experience while improving their professional skills. Here, professional competence is ingrained in language competence, the former being the priority and the latter being a means to an end.

2.2. ESP: When ignorance undermines professional performance

From what has been said about the role of ESP as related to the achievement of professional competence the importance of training learners for a specific field clearly stands out. Therefore, one cannot but admit that the ignorance of ESP in the training of some learners for some specific fields will be harmful to them. In fact a learner who needs the English language to perform in his specific field might feel terribly frustrated for not being able to cope effectively with his everyday activities which require English for successful professional performance.

3. ESP: A socially oriented subject

Given the fact that ESP serves society, it clearly stands as a socially oriented subject. I therefore feel the necessity to show the extent to which ESP contributes to the improvement of social life.

3.1. ESP: An agent of the advent of a more dynamic society

The social function of language has often been referred to as a strong argument to sustain the idea of the importance of language in society. Language is used for many different purposes, social interactions, debates and discussions concerning

the life of a society, provision of ideas for the improvement of a situation, explanation of some social phenomena and instruction among others. From this point of view it is obvious that no society can function without language. ESP reinforces this outstanding role of language to the extent it makes language users more operational in their specific field of interest increasing at the same the dynamism of society. A specialist in a given field is more likely to do more things using the language than the one who has a limited command of the kind of language required for participation and communication. The good command of general English might not be enough for the language user to be actively involved in some aspects of his professional life. This in turn might have a bad impact on the dynamic functioning of society.

3.2. ESP: An agent of local development

Although the idea of ESP being an agent of development seems obvious, there is a need to enlighten the reader on the extent to which it contributes actively to development in general and particularly to local development. The study of ESP as agent of local development provides some ways in which it influences development. First, ESP allows specialists to be able to read and understand written ideas about their specific field. This logically leads them to benefit from innovative ideas in their field. Professionals can also take advantage of this ability to read and understand in the field to acquire new knowledge for their personal improvement and increase their efficiency at work. Secondly, English being the world language, ESP can help interact with foreign specialist in one's specific field visiting the country. Finally, ESP can help facilitate the in-service training of workers about innovative technology in their field of interest.

3.3. ESP: An agent of cross-regional development

International relations be in business, politics or other fields require not only a good command of general English but also a good knowledge of the language needed in the specific field of interest. The context of international relations is not a playground for those specialists who have a poor command of the language needed for interactions. It is an opportunity for exchange of ideas in specific fields, for learning from the others, for providing ideas which can influence development in other regions. Without ESP specialists in some given fields might not be efficient at an international scale. They might lack the required knowledge

which can make them become operational at this level. Today a specialist who wants to take an active part in an international colloquium or seminar needs to be well-equipped in the specific language knowledge of his field of interest. Otherwise, he might remain passive during the different sessions and come back home empty-handed.

4. The Democratic Perspectives of ESP

As a professionally and socially oriented subject ESP provides an outstanding contribution to society. This contribution reaches another dimension when one considers its democratic perspectives. Democracy being currently praised, cherished and encouraged in countries the world over one cannot but admit the relevance of addressing the issue of the democratic perspectives of ESP in order to show how it serves this way of life.

4.1. Life in a Democracy

As Aristotle suggests, democracy is a way of life. As such it entails a certain number of duties and rights on the part of the citizens of a democratic society. Combining their duties and rights five main elements characterize them: freedom of participation, freedom of expression, freedom of organisation, the achievement of excellence, influencing the life of the society (constructing, transforming and improving it). Given these characteristics, I wonder whether ESP as defined earlier in this paper has some democratic perspectives. In order to have more insight into this issue one needs to discuss the different orientations given to the ESP course showing how these orientations suggest its democratic dimension. Consequently, my development will be rooted in the professional and social orientations of the ESP course.

1.1.1. The Democratic Relevance of the Underlying Rationale of ESP

Unlike general English which focuses essentially on the correct use of the English language by its learners, ESP is rooted in needs analysis. It places the target needs of learners at the core of the training process. Consequently, it encourages needs analysis prior to any training session. This aims at answering the following question: What do learner need the language for? From this point of view ESP is in harmony with the commonly shared idea that the best way to help a person is take into account his interests. Just like ESP, democracy works for the interests

of the people, the satisfaction of these interests being the very aim of a democratic government. The democratic perspective of ESP clearly stands out. Democracy is a matter of creating the conditions for the people to have a say in its ruling. ESP implicitly or explicitly does the same by considering learners' needs in the design of a course.

Writing about learners' target needs Tom Hutchinson and Alan Waters (1987) draw the line between necessities, lacks and wants. Necessities, they feel, are determined by the demands of the target situation. To train a pilot, for example, the needs should be determined by the language required in order to be able to work at this post. The lacks suggests taking account of what the learner already knows so that one can decide which of the necessities he lacks. As can be seen, both the necessities and the lacks leave the learner without an active role in decisions about his training. Hutchinson and Waters (p.57) explain that "... there is no necessary relationship between necessities as perceived by sponsor or ESP teacher and what the learners want or feel they need." It is true that there is sometimes a gap between the necessities and the lacks on the one hand and the wants on the other. Equally true is the fact that the formers can sometimes match with the latter. In any case what matters here is the idea of what suits the learner just like in democracy where the welfare of the people stands as the main concern of the government. Besides, the example of a medical doctor prescribing a diet according to the needs of his patient's organism regardless of his wants clearly indicates that a strong commitment to the learner's wants might sometimes lead us to the wrong path.

1.1.2. When the Implementation of ESP in Professional Life Explains its Contribution to a Democratic Society

ESP in professional life provides a striking image of democracy in action in many respects. No matter what how ESP serves democracy, one must admit that it stands as a powerful tool in the hands of democracy. Consequently, I feel the necessity to discuss the social relevance of ESP from a democratic point of view. The question which needs to be answered is as follows: How does the implementation of ESP in professional life explain its contribution to a democratic society?

4.1.2.1. The Interactive Function of ESP

ESP is taught in schools to provide learners and potential professionals in some specific fields with the kind of English which will enable them to interact with others at work as well as during other activities related to their profession (conferences, colloquia, seminars, workshops, ...) both locally and at an international scale. Interaction with others stands as one of the prerequisites of life in a democratic society. For it is during interaction that people have a chance to expose their potential to others while learning from them. This sets the field for dynamic exchange and develops citizens' openness to others. ESP adds to the interactive nature of language this possibility to use one's specific knowledge in the language to achieve what I refer to as 'focused interaction'. Democracy supposes that all citizens have a chance to take an active part in debates and discussions about some issues concerning the life of their country. The lack of knowledge of the kind of language required to interact with others might leave some citizens at the fringes of debates and discussions, frustrated by their inability to exteriorize their ideas in their specific field. Life in general and particularly life in a democracy is essentially made of interaction. And a failure to use the appropriate language to interact with others might be harmful to the manifestation of democracy. From this development the interactive function of ESP and its impact on life in a democratic society clearly stands out.

4.1.2.2. When ESP Allows Active Participation

Participation is among the values that are the most praised in a democracy. For the sake of dynamism we often talk about active participation. Active participation is vital in a democracy. All citizens regardless of some considerations (social status, training, beliefs ...) are expected to influence the life of their country by contributing to its construction and its improvement. And this can only be achieved through active participation. ESP courses contribute to the training of citizens who will be able to use their knowledge of the English language to influence the life of the company by contributing to its improvement. ESP adds to the ability of an individual to take an active part in the life of the company and thereby the life of the society the possibility to make this contribution more effective through what I refer to as 'focused participation'. By 'focused participation' I mean using the language to involve actively in issues concerning the specific field of interest of an individual. Democratic ideal

supposes equal chance for participation. And this, I feel, is achieved through the opportunity that ESP offers people to invest effectively in the construction, the improvement and the transformation of their country. With all this no one will fail to recognize the outstanding role ESP plays in a democratic society.

4.1.2.3. ESP and the Achievement of Excellence

Excellence generally refers to the fact of being the best in one's field of interest. Democracy encourages the achievement of excellence. For the sake of fairness people who excel in their specific field deserves more rewards for they are the ones who provide more contribution to the development and the improvement of life in a society. The effort to achieve excellence allows the realization of workers' potentials. And ESP contributes effectively to it to the extent that it helps workers improve in their specific field through their active participation in activities related to their field (seminars, workshops, conferences, colloquia ...) and through the opportunity it offers them to read and understand written developments about innovative ideas concerning their field of interest. When one considers on the one hand democracy as a powerful agent of development and on the other hand the influence that ESP has on the improvement of life in a democratic society, one clearly sees that ESP's support to democracy is undeniably relevant.

1.2. The Didactic Implications of ESP as a Means to the End of Democracy

The link between ESP and democracy has been discussed. The relevance of this link leads me to reflect on the didactic implications of ESP as a means to the end of democracy. My aim is to discuss the extent to which the practice of ESP in the classroom context reflects democratic principles while preparing learners for their future roles in the democratic society that they will have to help construct, transform and improve.

1.2.1. What Didactics Entails

Unlike pedagogy which shows interest in the way training takes places, didactics is concerned with the contents of subjects and the nature of the knowledge to be taught in class. Its objectives, according to Philippe Meirieu (1991), lie in the institution and the implementation of specific conditions of training (system of resources and constraints). He explains that this implementation is dependent on

the choice of tasks the completion of which presents the learner with some obstacles that he turns into problems. He should then be able to solve them in order to acquire new cognitive knowledge that can be mobilized when he is confronted with other problems which share the same characteristics (PP.87-88)².

1.2.2.Task-based Language Learning During ESP Courses and Education for Democracy

Given the preoccupations of didactics and the requirements of the ESP course, I wonder about the extent to which the task-based approach encouraged and effectively used in most ESP teaching contexts prepares learners for life in a democratic society. As Jérôme Kouassi (2009) indicates, the democratic virtues of a training rooted in the completion of tasks are obvious. To sustain his view, he considers problem-solving tasks which involve learners in such practices as the expression of hypotheses, the description of experiences, the comparison of alternatives and the evaluation of solutions encouraged in democratic societies. He goes on as to suggest that

“... the exposition of learners to an appropriate degree of intellectual and linguistic challenge during the completion of tasks, added to the relative flexibility of tasks that offer them the opportunity to carry out interpersonal interactions (discussion, exchange of ideas, expression of opinions, freedom of choice of language forms to convey meaning, etc.) are as many elements arouse our interest and confirm the democratic virtues of task-based learning.” (P.135)³

Moreover, ESP being in my view more practical than theoretical, I cannot but encourage the implementation of practices that allow the effectiveness of the philosophy of ‘learning by doing’ advocated by the famous American educationist and philosopher John Dewey.

² « Compte tenu du niveau de pré-requis du sujet, compte tenu des contraintes spécifiques de l’objet, quelles tâches peut-on proposer de telle manière que, en les effectuant, le sujet rencontre un obstacle, puisse en faire un problème et le résoudre par lui-même, afin d’acquérir une habileté cognitive nouvelle, mobilisable en face d’autres problèmes ayant les mêmes caractéristiques ? »

³ « ... l’exposition des apprenants à un degré approprié de défis intellectuel et linguistique au cours de l’exécution des tâches, ajoutée à la flexibilité relative des tâches qui leur offre l’occasion d’avoir des interactions interindividuelles (discussion, échanges d’idées, expression d’opinions, liberté de choix de formes langagières pour véhiculer le sens, etc.) sont autant d’éléments qui éveillent notre intérêt et nous situent sur les vertus démocratiques du Task-based learning. »

The ESP course is essentially rooted in the acquisition of knowledge in the language specific to a given field. Suggested tasks often challenge learners' ability to find the specialized language needed for their completion. This specialized language stands as an obstacle that learners turn into a problem. Their effort to solve the existing problem leads them to the acquisition of new knowledge. Democracy, I said earlier in this paper, encourages participation and excellence to name only these two. From this point of view the practice of ESP in the classroom context based on task-based instruction prepares learners for life in a democracy in the sense that they have to participate in the acquisition of knowledge in the language specific to their field of interest while developing excellence resulting from their effort to achieve better performances.

1.2.3. The Democratic Behaviour of the ESP Teacher as a Powerful Tool for Learners' Education for Democracy

Dudley-Evans and St John⁴ indicate that " ... in the more specific ESP classes, (...), the teacher sometimes becomes more like a language consultant, enjoying equal status with the learners who have their own expertise in the subject matter." They go on as to explain that "... the teacher is not in the position of being the 'primary knower' of the carrier content of the material. The students may in many cases, (...) know more about the content than the teacher. (...) this provides the ESP teacher with the opportunity to draw on students' knowledge of the content in order to generate genuine communication in the classroom. All this suggests on the part of the teacher the use of flexible approaches, the willingness to negotiate, to cooperate, to collaborate and to listen to learners, and an interest in the disciplines or professional activities the students are involved in.

Should this expected behaviour be effective, it will provide ESP learners with the ideal context for acquiring some democratic values which will later help them integrate into their democratic society. More than a mere provider of knowledge the ESP teacher stands as a mirror in which learners see their own images. His teaching practices train the students to achieve knowledge of the language related to their specific field while developing in them the values praised by democratic societies.

⁴ Op.cit.

1.2.4. Didactic Choice for a More Democratic Perspective of the ESP Class

The above development stresses the democratic perspectives of ESP. In order to provide more insight into the extent to which classroom practices can help enhance the democratic perspectives of ESP classes, I suggest some practical activities. Following didactic principles the activities will set the field for learners to face an obstacle that they will have to turn into a problem. The resolution of the problem will lead them to the construction and the acquisition of knowledge.

Task

You have the responsibility of helping a tourist visiting your home town find a room in a hotel but **your knowledge in the specialized language is desperately poor**. You now have to read and understand a letter from your expected visitor.

Letter from the expected visitor

Dear Sir, how are you?

I'm Konadu, the tourist you are expecting. I'm writing to provide some information about my hotel. I sent a letter last week about a room. As our seminar is supposed to begin next Monday and end two days later, I had **to book** earlier for a three-day **stay** in order to have a **single room** with a **private bathroom** that suits me. You know, you never feel comfortable when you have to share things. My room number is 01223. Breakfast is served at the hotel while lunch and dinner are provided by our country officials. So there was no need to choose **full board**.

I'll see you soon. Many thanks!

Understanding the content of the letter: a problem-solving task

This letter presents the reader with some **obstacles** caused by the existence of the five unfamiliar items printed in bold. These obstacles are turned into **problems** which result in the following question: How can I guess the meanings of the unfamiliar items in order to understand the content of the letter?

Solving the problems in order to overcome the existing obstacles

Step1: Working individually to find out the meanings of the unfamiliar items from context.

It is a stage of self-reliance which offers the individual the opportunity to make personal effort in order to achieve excellence.

Step2: Contextual guessing of the meanings through intra-group interactions (interactions within each group consisting of 4 to 6 learners).

Each individual learner suggests his findings to the group developing arguments to convince the others to accept them. These findings are discussed, evaluated, compared to other findings, improved, or even objected to.

Step3: The meanings agreed on in the different groups are exposed in plenary creating a real context for discussions and debates.

These steps offer a real opportunity for the achievement of excellence, dynamic participation, exchange, compromise as well as many other practices that are encouraged in a democracy.

CONCLUSION

This article aimed at reflecting on the contribution of ESP to life in a democratic society. The development so far enabled me to study ESP in its own dynamics before showing the extent to which it sustains democracy. I have come to the conclusion that ESP stands as a 'partner' to democracy in many respects: allowing active interaction between professional, standing as a powerful tool for active participation in the life of a country, contributing to the achievement of excellence in one's specific field of interest. This democratic virtue of ESP being essentially dependent on the training conditions of learners, the article rightly reveals the outstanding contribution of the task-based approach implemented in ESP classrooms to the preparation of learners for life in a democratic society. Despite the relevance of the points raised in this paper, I still have the apprehension that there is something left to be done in this field. Consequently, I suggest that further reflections show interest in the way innovative approaches to the practice of ESP in the classroom context can increase its contribution to the to the construction, the transformation and the improvement of democratic societies.

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