

## **DIRECTIONS IN ESP RESEARCH: IMPLICATIONS IN MALAYSIA**

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### **Introduction**

The topic for this paper has a very important tag to it, and there is a greater resounding effect to this tag than it appears to be, namely the implications of ESP research in Malaysia. In view of the significance of the research on English language teaching in Malaysia, it would be better to start off by giving a historical background of the introduction of ESP in the country, before going into the discussion of "directions" in research.

### **Background on English Language Policy**

The teaching of English for special purposes (ESP) in general may be said to come to the fore in the early seventies. This was the time when the English language teaching world began to have a concern for separate teaching methodologies for English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL)

The division of English Language Teaching (ELT) into the teaching of the language as ESL and EFL may be viewed as a consequence of the language planning policies that were being implemented in various countries of the world, especially the developing countries, including Malaysia. These countries, particularly the young nations in Asia, and various nation states in the Middle East, Africa and South America, have their own national languages which stood as the symbols of their sovereignty. It was through these languages that they were able to unite their people, and it was also through these languages that they were able to give a sense of identity to themselves as nation states.

After achieving independence, these countries had to embark on nation building. In the effort to elevate the educational and economic status of their people and to participate in the affairs of the world, they needed a language other than their own to see them through. For those countries which were once ruled or protected by English speaking powers like Great Britain and the United States, English became their

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natural choice. With those which were once under powers that were non-Anglophone, like the French and the Dutch, there did not seem to be much resistance in adopting English either as a main or an additional international language.

The policies of these countries differ one from the other in the status given to English. Although each has its own idiosyncracies as opposed to the other, these countries can be placed in two main categories. The first consists of those which maintain English as one of the languages used in its education system as well as a language of administration, the other language being the national language and/or other language within its region.

The second category comprises countries which use only the national language in all its educational and administrative spheres as well as in the judiciary. English in these countries is taught as a main language in the school, and people are encouraged to acquire the language. Malaysia now belongs to this secondary category.

#### **Implications of the Division Between ESL and EFL**

The division of countries into ESL and EFL countries may not give a true picture of what really happens in real life. However, this division has given the ELT theorists and methodologists as well as ESP teachers directions, their ELT materials and teaching English in the classroom.

As said earlier, ESL countries have adopted English as one of their main languages of communication. This being the case, their students are deemed to have a proficiency in general English (GE) of a level that enables them to handle various types of communication in the language concerned. There seems to be a general understanding that their adeptness in handling various situations in English in their educational and professional pursuits grow with their constant use of English. Arising from this, students with ESL are in general deemed to have sufficient proficiency in all the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing.

Singapore and the Philippines have often been cited as ESL countries. Using the ESL yardstick vis-a-vis that of EFL, the proficiency in English among their students are said to be of a high level.

Things are not considered to be as bright in the EFL situation. In the first place, English in this situation has a limited range of use. For most of the EFL countries like Thailand and Indonesia, other than a few hours of English lesson in the school and the university, the students do not seem to have much exposure to the language despite the need to read the latest books on science and technology and various other fields of study in English. Here, it is the reading skill that is required, and reading means reading serious books in the aca-

ademic discipline which they have chosen as their line of study. Hence, what they need from the ELT classes is reading for academic purposes. Reading for other purposes, e.g. for pleasure and for cultural enhancement, is considered not relevant to this type of ELT. Arising from this need, various methods and approaches in the teaching of reading comprehension to EFL students have emerged.

In drawing the line between ESL and EFL, English language experts have placed Malaysia in the EFL category, as evidenced from the many deliberations at annual conferences of RELC (Asmah Haji Omar 1984). The labelling of Malaysia as an EFL country is contrary to what Malaysia has always perceived herself to be. Malaysia has always considered herself an ESL country, having officially defined English as the second most important language for her people.

Regardless of how other people perceived her in the light of her national language policy, Malaysia implemented the communicative syllabus in the 1970's in the schools, as the aim was to produce students who could communicate in English. However, during the period, at the University level there emerged another objective, and that was reading comprehension of academic texts. The students had to be taught this particular skill in order to read their textbooks and reference materials in English.

The development mentioned above had motivated the University of Malaya to formulate an ELT policy which had reading comprehension as its objective. With this, the University's Language Centre in 1978 embarked on a research project known as University of Malaya English for Special Purposes Project (UMESPP). This was a research which led to the production of materials for teaching reading comprehension in the academic field, under the banner *Skills for Learning* (See Bibliography).

As expected, the focus on reading comprehension had brought about an imbalance in the acquisition of skills in English. Graduates from the university were found to be lacking in their spoken English. It would not have been a problem if these graduates did not aspire for an employment in private or multinational companies which require the use of English. Even in the government sector, proficiency in English was required to some extent.

As government servants, the graduates would be doing their job comfortably in the national language provided they were not placed in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the external affairs departments of other Ministries. Once they were associated with external or foreign affairs, English.

Another category of people who needed spoken English at a high proficiency level were those in the legal profession, as the courts were still using English in their proceedings.

The need for oral skills in English had motivated the University of Malaya Language Centre to work on another project known as the University of Malaya Spoken English Project (UMSEP). This project produced a set of materials for teaching English to the professionals, specifically the executives, managers and lawyers. These materials can also be categorised as belonging to ESP. Here we see that ESP, at least in the case of University of Malaya, had moved from reading comprehension of academic texts to using English in oral form in management and the legal profession.

UMESPP and UMSEP were two separate projects with two different objectives. Each had its own model to follow. However, the methodologies of research for the two were not entirely unrelated for there was a great deal of overlapping between them. It is with this background knowledge of these two projects that I move on to the next section of this paper on ESP research.

#### Basic Premises in ESP-Research

Before starting on a research on ESP, there are certain basic premises that have to be made, and these take the form of the following hypotheses.-

- (1) That there is a need for teaching ESL in Malaysia and that various professions and services are already using ESP
- (2) That ESP is a variety of English that shares a common core with GE but in many ways deviate from the latter

The first premise leads to a needs analysis, while the second an analysis of English language materials used for the various specific purposes.

#### Needs Analysis

From a general observation of the English used in administration, management and various professions, like the legal profession, accountancy, medicine, dentistry, hospitality services etc., the first impression one gets is that each type of service or profession has its own jargons and its own way of putting communication across. This is an indication that ESP is in use and that there is a need for acquiring it.

Although this impression to a certain extent reflects the real situation, research on the needs for ESP still has to be carried out. It is only through research that the details of the needs can be identified. These are the types of professions or vocations that required ESP, the language learning objectives, the types of skills required, the level of

proficiency to be attained, the educational background of the participants (viz. the people who use or are likely to use ESP), intensity of use, situation of use, etc.

The needs survey will first of all result in a list of the domains that require ESP. Each domain may even have subdomains or related domains. For example, in the medical domain it may turn out that the needs for ESP are not just with the doctors but also with the therapists, the nutritionists, and the paramedics. The hospitality services may include hotel and catering, viz. for the receptionists, waiters and waitresses, and hospitality in air travelling, viz. for the air stewards and stewardesses.

Hence, the model for the domains that require ESP may appear as follows.

<i>Domain</i>	<i>Profession/Vocation</i>	<i>Related Domain/ Profession</i>
(1) Legal	Solicitorship Advocacy Judiciary	Draughtsmanship
(2) Medicine	Medicine (Various branches) Surgery (various branches)	Pharmacy Pharmacology Nursing Medical Technology, etc.
(3) Dentistry	Various branches of Dentistry Dental Nursing Dental Technology etc.	
(4) Hospitality	Hotel Catering Tourism	
(5) Foreign Affairs	Ambassadorship Administration External Trade etc.	
(6) Finance	Banking Accountancy Insurance	
(7) Academic	Various Sciences	
(8) Esthetics	Cosmetics Beauty care	
(9) _____	_____	
(10) _____	_____	

### Language Skills and Level of Attainment

"Language skills" here refer to the four basic skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Not all professions require equal proficiency in all the four skills. Subdomains of a single domain may differ one from the other in the skills required.

For example, in the legal profession the judges and the lawyers require all the four skills concerned, but the legal draughtsman may require the reading and the writing skills more than the other two. Conversely, for airline stewards and stewardesses, the reading and the writing skills may not be important at all, but the other two skills, that is, listening and speaking are most necessary in their line of duty. The same may be said of those in the esthetics services.

The doctors and the dentists need to have a high level of proficiency in listening, speaking and reading. They require the writing they are also in the research or academic line when they have to write papers. The same may be said of those in other "high level" professions like accountancy, banking, etc.

The 1980 UMSEP survey of professional needs of English in Malaysia showed that in business and banking both spoken and written English was necessary. This was because meetings were conducted in English and correspondences were mostly written in English. Overall, between 75% and 90% of activities were in English.

The situation was slightly different in public administration. The Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Trade (both internal and external), the foreign relations divisions of all Ministries, and the Defence Ministry seemed to use English in internal meetings which involved senior personnel. Though correspondence was mainly in Malaysia, reports were substantially in English (John Moore et al, 1980). It has always been a tradition with Malaysian government departments and statutory bodies to produce reports in both Malay and English.

Another UMSEP survey, this one on individuals, shows the type of skills expected of a government officer in the Ministry of Fisheries. To quote the report,

"The participant is currently employed as a Settlement Officer with the Ministry of Fisheries, Kuala Lumpur. His central duty is to assist in the resettlement of East Coast fishermen into land-based occupations. English is not required in the liaison with fishermen in the settlement process. However, English is needed for report writing and for liaising with foreign consultants and for the purpose of participating in seminars."

(Noor Azlina Abdullah, 1980)

The UMSEP surveys were carried out in 1980. More than a decade has passed, and the situation may or may not be the same from what it used to be. With the government's unabated emphasis on the acquisition of English as a second language, the needs for English may not have diminished at all in the sectors discussed above.

However, in the legal profession there has been a definite change in policy with effect from January 1990, which saw the tail end of English as the official language of the court. This particular function of English has officially been replaced by Malay. However, a provision has been given for the use of English in the courts when requested by the defence lawyers in the interest of justice (Asmah Haji Omar, 1990)

The findings of one of the the UMSEP surveys of 1980 show that English was used in court trials even though the people involved were all Malays. An example of such a trial is cited as follows. -

"The magistrate may conduct a case in Malay and/or English etc., if the witnesses and counsel approve. Questions may be asked in Chinese or Tamil. Otherwise the magistrate uses English, arranging for translation where necessary. This frequently reaches extremes: we have observed a case in which the magistrate, police, prosecutor, police witness, and accused were all Malays, yet (perhaps for tactical reasons) the prosecutor chose to use English and so an interpreter was used for the witness." (John Moore et al, 1980: 14)

The situation as described above may not be the same in the Malaysian courts in the 1990's. However, since English is maintained as a second language in Malaysia and with the provision for the use of English in the courts as cited above, the language may still be maintaining its importance in the legal profession. Some or a great deal of its use in the legal profession may have shifted to Malay, but there may still remain certain areas of use which need to be executed in English.

In 1980, the minimal English language use for a magistrate was to read the relevant texts, explain the law, understand evidence and write up judgements, and the judgements were invariably delivered in English. The Malaysian magistrate of today may have to read the legal texts in English, but he will have to explain the law, understand evidence given, and write up judgements in Malay. It appears that for the purpose of presiding and judging over a case, the magistrate's needs for English lies in reading English, specifically reading legal texts written in English (as there is still a dearth of law texts and reference materials written in Malay).

The professional life of the magistrate may not be confined to the law courts. Like the settlement officer in the Ministry of Fisheries, he may want to attend seminars and liaise with foreigners who share the same profession as himself. He may also harbour a desire to be promoted to the position of a High Court judge and ultimately be Lord President. For such purposes, he needs more of English than just the skill to read law texts.

The seminars may use the legal jargons that he has been used to when he reads written texts, but exchanges of an academic or professional nature require more than jargons. The participants not only has to have good oral skills but has to be able to communicate effectively in his field of specialisation. It can be predicted that the Malaysian magistrates of today still require spoken English although this particular skill may not be often called for in the court.

#### **Purposes of ESP**

Purpose is a function of skills. The purposes of having the oral skills are to participate in social conversations, private discussions, formal departmental meetings, negotiations and interviews, giving lectures, passing judgements etc.

With the writing skill, the purposes are writing letters, memos, minutes of meetings, annual reports, survey reports, references etc. Reading can be done for getting information, for evaluation, and for pleasure.

In ESP research, information on the purposes of requiring particular skills has to be obtained. Information begets information, and information on the purposes will give information on the types of discourse used.

With the functions clearly identified, the researcher can move on to getting data consisting of authentic materials or texts used for the various purposes.

#### **Collection of Data**

"Data" refers to the actual texts or discourses in various situations for various professions. Research into ESP should make use of authentic materials, that is, language materials actually used by the professional while carrying out their duties.

A question may be posed regarding the English language materials collected in a Malaysian situation. The type of English used in business meetings in firms in Malaysia may not be of the type that approximates standard British or American English.

UMSEP recordings have shown that the English of the Malaysian business executives is a distance apart from these two standards. At

best it can be referred to as what Platt and Weber calls MEL, that is the highest level of Malaysian English in terms of grammar and pronunciation. Even if it were so, the materials can prove to be valuable data from the linguistic as well as from the pragmatic aspects of the discourse.

From the linguistic point of view, the data contain various types of grammatical

It may turn out these constructions form the linguistic characteristics of the discourse, and that participants in such a discourse have to understand and be able to use such constructions

The language used by flight attendants may show a greater recurrence of certain grammatical constructions than, say, the ones used by the receptionist in a five-star hotel. In the same way, the language used in business meetings may show a certain propensity for constructions which have a lower occurrence in an academic seminar or in the law court.

Besides characteristic linguistic constructions, oral as well as written discourse may produce jargons and idiomatic expressions which are peculiar to each type of profession.

especially in spoken language may be peppered with flaws or errors, and the jargons and idiomatic expressions may not be enunciated in the most acceptable way of pronouncing the language. But they are just raw data which are living proofs of the fact that such language registers do exist.

For the researcher who is concerned only with the analysis of registers, the data are of an empirical nature, and this adds to the scientific value of his analysis. For the applied linguist who prepares materials for the teaching of ESP or who designs ESP tests and syllabuses, data taken from actual discourse will give him an idea on designing his own ESP framework and on the selection and gradation of items to be taught. He can even use the raw data to refashion authentic data to take the form of language exercises and tasks.

Authentic spoken materials are also valuable data for the study of pragmatics. It projects the real picture of the structure of the conversation in terms of turn takings and hedgings and such like features. From this, the researcher can rebuild a "mould", as it were, in which to cast reconstructed texts for use in the ESP classroom.

It is important that what finally appears in teaching manuals reflect the use of language in real life situation. Researchers have often pointed out that the language taught in the classroom is different from what people normally use in the conduct of their day to day affairs. Marion Williams (1988) has researched on the language functions of language taught for meetings and language used in meetings. Her findings show that there is almost no correspondence between the exponents of the functions in the two contexts

Research using authentic texts takes what Sager and Dungworth call "the naturalness approach". With authentic and natural language as data, the ESP researcher will pave the way for the writing of near-natural materials for teaching ESP.

Research on ESP which focusses on reading should also be based on authentic written materials. For ESP law reading, for example, materials should come from law texts, textbooks, journals, records of judgments, acts and regulations etc.

In terms of data collection, it is easier to get to the written text than the spoken one. In terms of "standard", as it were, written texts are in general authored by people who are knowledgeable in their own professional field. Furthermore, before publication, the manuscripts get edited by professional editors. This being the case, the researcher in Malaysia can take any respectable textbook in the field that he is working or as his source of ESP data. Even if he uses a book or an article written by a Malaysian, he will not have much to worry about using a text written in unacceptable English.

There has not been much study on academic or professional English written by Malaysians in terms of grammatical constructions. However, there has been mention here and there about Malaysian lexical items and idiomatic expressions creeping into the English texts written by Malaysians. Even if such items occur in those texts that are used for ESP research, they will not detract from the objective of identifying linguistic and pragmatic characteristics of texts in the various fields.

Another advantage which written texts have over oral discourse is the stability of the written word. It is easier and perhaps much faster to identify the linguistic and pragmatic characteristics of the written texts than it is with the oral one.

The English language used in two different physics books written by two different persons (say, one in U.K. and the other in USA) may have a closer affinity to each other in terms of the choice of linguistic constructions than the language used in debates on physics in the two countries concerned. Furthermore, the pragmatics of the written language is easier to identify and explain than those of the oral discourse. All this means that data collection for oral discourse requires a great deal more time and effort than the one on written texts.

At this juncture, it is appropriate for me to add that the pragmatics of scientific Malay as well as Malay in report writing is very much identical to that in English in these two registers. This is because the use of Malay for these registers has been modelled on English in the same context. By mentioning this, I am offering a suggestion that Malay used in certain registers can be useful in the research on ESP and vice versa.

Another reason why an oral discourse is more demanding than the written one as data for research lies in the fact that the former is usually realised in terms of speech events.

### Speech Events and Speech Acts

A speech event is an activity or aspect of activity that is directly governed by rules or norms for the use of speech. (Dell Hymes, 1974, p. 52) A private conversation between two friends, or a boardroom meeting may be cited as a speech event.

The components of a speech event are speech acts. A speech event may then have a set of speech acts or a single act. A conversation which is a speech event may consist of an argument as well as a warning, which are two speech acts. On the other hand, a warning "Look out" which is a single speech act, may also stand as a whole speech event.

A research on spoken ESP should identify the speech acts that make up the events that are normally used in certain professions. The identification of the acts will enable him to see the constructions a particular act is conveyed in. According to Hymes (1974: 52) the speech act

"represents a level distinct from the sentence, and not identifiable with any single portion of grammar, nor with segments of any particular size defined in terms of other levels of grammar (Dell Hymes, 1974: 52)

This means that in actual language use, a sentence identified as belonging to a certain type according to grammatical rules may not be functioning according to the functional expectations of its type. For example, an utterance may be classified as a question according to the rules of grammar. In actual language use, it may be a command, a request, a challenge, or a threat.

Speech acts in certain professions may be very formulaic, that is, they adhere to certain strict rules not only in the choice of construction types and jargons, but also in the ordering of information. Randolph Quirk notes that in making radio communications, flight-deck crews have to adhere to the rules which lay down both the form and the order for presenting data, like identity, position, time, attitude, etc., for example

"London Control GBFBO Daventry at 47 flight level 80 estimating Lichfield at 0901."

(Quirk, 1982. vii)

A deviation from the rules may cause a misunderstanding which

may result in disaster. The crash of a British cargo plane in 1989 as it approached Subang international airport was, according to reports, the result of the pilot's miscomprehension of the message relayed to him from the control tower. The message was "Descend two four zero, zero, zero feet" which was supposed to mean "Descend to 24000 feet." The pilot who died in the crash could have interpreted it to mean "Descend to 4000 feet", taking the "two" in the controller's message as "to".

It appears that the control tower had deviated from the international convention which requires that the figures stating altitudes should be uttered in full, and not according to digits. If the rule was observed, then the message would have taken the form "Descend 24 thousand feet."

The type of research suggested here is one that also takes the approach of the ethnography of speaking, besides discourse analysis. However, since ESP research in Malaysia generally has the objective of producing teaching materials, it would also be feasible to incorporate into it an approach of a linguistic and psycholinguistic nature, which may look into errors and aspects of language acquisition.

#### **GE and Classification of ESP**

A question should now be asked and answered. Is ESP or any language with SP so rarefied that it is concerned only with the substance of particular professions or academic disciplines? If the answer is in the positive, then ESP is an entity on its own, apart from general English.

On the other hand, from a general observation, we can see that in most ESP situations there is a great deal of general English. This means that apart from jargons, specific constructions and particularistic formulae, the other elements of ESP are those that one gets in general English. This explains why a non-biologist who is competent in English may be able to read and get an idea of what is said in a passage on biology, except for specialised biological terms, nomenclatures and phraseologies. All this goes to show that ESP is none other than a variety of English.

Obviously, ESP belongs to the variety better known as register. Since under ESP there are so many types of English for special purposes, it is then feasible to recognise a level of ESP which acts as a supraregister below which are nodes indicating various types of ESPs showing subvarieties used in the various professions or domains. The nodes may undergo further splitting with the divisions of domains into subdomains.

As far as GE is concerned, research into ESP should also take into

consideration the features of general English. Among these features are those of a sociocultural nature.

Textbooks teaching ESP do not seem to give priority to sociocultural features. Such features may not be significant in certain ESPs, e.g. scientific texts or communications from the deck-flight crew, as language used in these situations is very low in terms of sociocultural context. However, other types of ESP may have a high a sociocultural context, e.g. the ESP in the hospitality business or in business management. Participants have to address each other in the proper manner and in tune with the context the speech event takes place.

In ordinary language use, Malay can be said to have a high sociocultural context compared to English. More honorifics are used in an ordinary conversation in Malay compared to that in English. What then has this got to do with ESP?

Most of our professionals are more likely going to use ESP in the home context. This means that ESP when used in Malaysia has to fit into the Malaysia context. For example, ESP in a business meeting which involves a VIP, especially a government minister or a member of one of the royal households, has to take into account the sociolinguistic rules that are required in such a context even if the language is not Malay. In such a meeting, the ordinary participant is not free to use the democratic "you" to the VIP concerned. He has to resort to the appropriate Malay honorific.

### Conclusion

In terms of directions in research, what I am proposing here is one that looks for features of ESP used in the English language world in general as well as the features that are idiosyncratic to Malaysia.

I have also suggested a categorisation of ESP into upper and lower nodes above which is the suprarregister of ESP. Such a categorisation will serve as a useful guide in the selection of areas or domains and subdomains to work on. And the establishment of domains and subdomains should be used in needs analysis.

As ESP may consist of written texts as well as oral discourse, research into the register should apply the text or discourse analysis method. In this way, the researcher is able to identify the linguistic and pragmatic features which make up a text or a discourse.

Producing and receiving language communication is not only a language activity. It is also a psychological one. Hence, psycholinguistics should also be a part of this type of research.

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