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Technical English and General English – Are They Really Different?

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Abstract

This paper attempts to distinguish the differences between General English (GE) and Technical English (TE). First, it tries to fix the place of Technical English in ELT, and attempts to trace the purposes of learning the two varieties i.e., General English and Technical English, in the process shows how learning of TE can promote active participation in classroom activities, technical seminars, workshops and research paper publications, or in short how the learning of TE enables the learner use English for technical communication.

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Introduction

English is accepted as one of the languages used for global communication. It enables rapid exchange of information and research of common global problems leading to or resulting in technological progress.

Teaching languages is aimed at amplifying the quality of language studies and there by higher education as well. The development of language skills aims at active expansion of learners' proficiency in English.

In the global context, students at engineering institutions need a specific set of language skills for their success in education and in career. Language classes at this higher level always make use of the texts of specific professional areas (architecture, business, civil engineering, electronics, environment, management, etc.) Such texts are usually focused on the communicative needs of the learners. To meet these needs, language teaching approach called English for Specific Purposes (ESP) or TE is introduced. It is centered not only on the language (grammar, lexis, register), but also on the skills and discourses that combine the development of linguistic skills together with the acquisition of specific information.

Origins of ESP

Though a great deal about the origins of ESP could be written, notably, there are three reasons common to the emergence of all ESP: the demands of a Brave New World, a revolution in linguistics, and focus on the learner (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).

The general effect, of all the developments of post-war era, exerted pressure on the language teaching profession. The second key reason was a revolution in linguistics. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) point out a significant variation in the ways of spoken and written English. If language in different situations varies, then tailoring language instruction to meet the needs of learners in specific contexts becomes a possibility. Hence, in the late 1960s and the early 1970s

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there were many attempts to describe English for Science and Technology (EST). Hutchinson and Waters (1987) identify Ewer and Latorre, Swales, Selinker and Trimble as a few of the prominent descriptive EST pioneers.

The final reason listed by Hutchinson and Waters (1987) has much to do with educational psychology. 'The assumption underlying this approach was that the clear relevance of the English course to their needs would improve the learners' motivation and thereby make learning better and faster.'

Here, rather than simply focus on the method of language delivery, more attention was given to the ways in which learners acquire language and the differences in the ways language is acquired. Learners were seen to employ different learning strategies, use different skills, enter with different learning schemata, and be motivated by different needs and interests. Therefore, focus on the learners' needs became equally vital as the methods employed to disseminate linguistic knowledge. Designing specific courses to better meet these individual needs was a natural extension of this thinking. Thus, ESL has become learner-centered or learning-centered.

All the three reasons listed above seem to point towards the need for increased specialization in language learning or teaching.

At this juncture, it becomes obligatory to learn what ESP is, to recognise the distinctions between the absolute and variable characteristics and also the types of ESP.

What is ESP?

ESP should be seen as an 'approach' to teaching, or what Dudley-Evans describes as an 'attitude of mind'. Such a view echoes that of Hutchinson et al. who state, "ESP is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner's reason for learning"(p. 19).

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Though, Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) modified Strevens' original definition of ESP to form their own, let us begin with Strevens. Strevens (1988) defined ESP by identifying its absolute and variable characteristics. His definition makes a distinction between four absolute and two variable characteristics:

I. Absolute Characteristics

ESP consists of English language teaching which is:

1. designed to meet specified needs of the learner;
2. related in content (i.e. in its themes and topics) to particular disciplines, occupations and activities;
3. centred on the language appropriate to those activities in syntax, lexis, discourse, semantics, etc., and analysis of this discourse;
4. in contrast with General English.

II. Variable Characteristics

ESP may be, but is not necessarily:

1. restricted as to the language skills to be learned (e.g. reading only);
2. not taught according to any pre-ordained methodology.

But at a 1997 Japan Conference on ESP, Dudley-Evans offered a modified definition. The revised definition he and St. John postulate is as follows:

I. Absolute Characteristics

1. ESP is defined to meet specific needs of the learner;
2. ESP makes use of the underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves;
3. ESP is centred on the language (grammar, lexis, and register), skills, discourse, and genres appropriate to these activities.

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II. Variable Characteristics

1. ESP may be related to or designed for specific disciplines;
2. ESP may use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of general English;
3. ESP is likely to be designed for adult learners, either at a tertiary level institution or in a professional work situation. It could, however, be for learners at secondary school level;
4. ESP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students;
5. Most ESP courses assume some basic knowledge of the language system, but it can be used with beginners (1998, pp. 4-5).

Dudley-Evans and St. John have removed the absolute characteristic that 'ESP is in contrast with General English' and added more variable characteristics. They assert that ESP is not necessarily related to a specific discipline. Furthermore, ESP is likely to be used with adult learners although it could be used with young adults in a secondary school setting.

Types of ESP

In the 'Tree of ELT' (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987), ESP is shown to have three branches:

1. English for Science and Technology (EST),
2. English for Business and Economics (EBE), and
3. English for Social Studies (ESS).

Each of these subject areas is further divided into two branches: English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP). An example of EOP for the EST branch is 'English for Technicians' whereas an example of EAP for the EST branch is 'English for Medical Studies'.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) note that there is not a clear-cut distinction between EAP and EOP: "people can work and study simultaneously; it is also likely that in many cases the

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language learnt for immediate use in a study environment will be used later when the student takes up, or returns to, a job" (p. 16).

EST focuses attention on the needs of the learner, needs that may be specified in terms of "the precise area of language required, skills needed, and the range of functions to which language is to be put," (Mackay and Mountford 1978:4) in the fields of science and technology. **It is concerned with teaching English as a tool, not as an end in itself.** Its significance lies in its attempt to achieve the required level of linguistic and communicative competence in the minimal amount of time.

EAP – English for Academic Purposes is one of the branches of ESP that helps the engineers and technologists exchange technical information through Technical English.

To quote the words of Peter Strevens, 'Technical English' uses little of general, philosophical or even methodological concepts; the special terminology used relates chiefly to concrete objects and practical processes, rather than to abstractions; quantification is mainly a matter of stating measurements rather than the symbolisation of mathematical relationships; there is a good deal of non-scientific or 'common-core' English interspersed in technical texts.

Differences: General English versus Technical English

Anthony (1997) notes that, it is not clear where ESP courses end and general English courses begin; numerous non-specialist ESL instructors use an ESP approach in that their syllabi are based on analysis of learner needs and their own personal specialist knowledge of using English for real communication.

Though the line between General English and ESP is very thin, it does exist. When asked about the differences Hutchinson et. al. (1987:53) aptly remark "in theory nothing, in practice a great deal."

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Teachers teaching General English concentrate more on the language in general. They aim at giving the learners a course that may satisfy their urge to know and understand certain language but when it comes to ESP or TE, teachers give more importance to needs analysis of the learners.

General purpose English facilitates the learners to acquire a good knowledge of lexis (new words), structures, content that enables the adequate level of mastery in all basic skills: Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing. As the contents are based on general topics, the learners feel it easy to learn and it sustains their language learning motivation.

Harding (2007) stresses that the general skills that a general English teacher uses e.g. being communicative, using authentic materials and analyzing English in a practical way are also applicable to ESP. He suggests that teachers should:

- Think about what is needed and don't just follow an off-the-shelf course or course book;
- Understand the nature of their students' subject area;
- Work out their language needs in relation to their skills;
- Use contexts, texts, situations from their subject area;
- Use authentic materials;
- Make the tasks as authentic as possible;
- Motivate the students with variety, relevance and fun;
- Take the classroom into the real world and bring the real world into the classroom.

The major difference between the teaching of Technical English and that of General English will normally be in the choice of contexts for listening and reading texts and in the choice of lexis in grammar and vocabulary exercises.

Even though the words used in Technical English are common words; they are being used to serve the needs of technical communication. The learners, for example, are encouraged to experiment the extended use of words from General English for describing the technical drawings. Initially, the learners of Technical English start describing or talking about buildings, Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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advantages and disadvantages of modern or old vehicles and later on gradually they learn to use Technical English for talking about the project designs, involve themselves in negotiations and hold technical conferences. They thus gain productive skills from simplicity to complexity and from generality to specificity i.e. the content inputs get more and more technical, the language inputs in the contents grow more and more specific.

Technical English serves various purposes and some of the important needs are listed below:

1. Reading Specialist literature
2. Sharing information in conferences
3. Listening for specific information
4. Meeting the workplace requirements

1. Reading Specialist Literature

It involves the reading of research documents or academic journals that may enhance their technical knowledge and is in a way a process of technical knowledge updation. Reading instruction manuals enables effective usage of the equipment.

2. Sharing Information in Conferences

The vital information gathered from experience and exposure needs to be shared with the community at large as a sort of return of favour. Such articulations in conferences and seminars give an individual an opportunity to make an effective presentation of ideas and in turn it promotes further discussion leading to common consensus.

3. Listening for Specific Information

Participating in conferences, listening to lectures or seminars or even taking part in discussion necessitates active listening skills.

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4. Meeting Workplace Requirement

One may require all the 4 skills of communication to manage or meet the workplace requirements. For example, one may have to collaborate with colleagues from various geographical parts of the nation or the world, receive customers or guests from across the Globe, periodically visit different places for various purposes etc.

Only on acquiring the necessary command over GE, the learner is encouraged to move ahead with TE. Eventually the knowledge and competence he gains through GE enables and ensures sustained interest in the learning and usage of TE, resulting in the assertive use of TE at workplace. Workplace requirement has now become much more demanding and complex. The success mantra today is sound technical knowledge and presence of mind complemented by proficient communication skills. Knowledge of English thus gained facilitates the access to the resources of new information and promotes active participation in various interdisciplinary cooperative programs at the international level that may require academic knowledge, scientific competence and objective evaluation of new ideas. One can understand from this discussion that teaching or learning ESP includes much more than the teaching of English through specific material and content.

Hence it can be stated that GE is the foundation of TE and they are different from each other in the sense that they are used to serve different purposes.

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