

The Teacher as Student in ESP Course Design

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Abstract

Teachers of ESP courses have often been criticized for lacking the specialist knowledge necessary for a complete understanding of target materials. As a result, many ESP teachers feel insecure in the classroom, lack confidence about their abilities to teach the course, and become overly sensitive to the views of specialists regarding the course design, materials, and in-class activities. In this paper, I argue that ESP teachers are quite similar to students in their desire to know more about the language of the target field, and their weaknesses when it comes to understanding the target material. By lowering their own status as all-knowing experts of the subject matter, and raising that of students as valuable contributors to classroom discourse, ESP teachers can create a more productive atmosphere that ultimately leads to greater all-round learning.

Key words: ESP, corpus-based learning, nurse-patient interaction

Introduction

In English for Specific Purposes (ESP), there has been a very long a still unresolved discussion on whether the teacher should be an expert in the target subject of the class. For example, should the teacher of an 'English for Nursing' class have experience taking care of patients, writing research papers related to nursing, or at least having an understanding of the field in general? Many specialists feel that in an ideal world, the answer to this question is "yes," as it would enable the teacher to give students deep insights into the "what," "how," and "why" of language use. Without this knowledge, it is said that a teacher of English could not properly teach the intricacies of language use in specialist subjects (Bell, 2002).

In the real world, however, there are many factors that prevent experts from teaching ESP courses. First, the available experts in the field often do not have good enough English skills to teach an ESP course, which is one of the main reasons why we need such courses in the first place (Madeleine, 2007). Second, field experts are often too busy with other work and classes, or are simply unwilling to teach an ESP course. Third, even if field experts have good English skills, and are willing to teach an ESP course, they are still not *language* experts. In other words, they have probably rarely considered the actual language they use in the field, have little understanding of what language items will be required in the field, and know little about the strengths and weaknesses in the language skills of students. Perhaps most

importantly they are unlikely to have had any experience creating an effective ESP course or program, which considers the needs of the learners, has relevant and appropriate materials, and includes an effective set of testing procedures.

Of course, many field experts are non-native speakers of English, and thus have traveled the same path that students will need to take to gain language proficiency. This gives them important insights into the learning process that are invaluable to students. However, having the ability to acquire the target language does not automatically mean that field experts know the most effective methods for others to acquire the same skills. The same argument can be made with general English; even though all native speakers by definition have acquired the target language, it does not mean that they are all qualified to teach it (Phillipson, 1996).

One solution to the problem of who should teach an ESP course, often quoted in the literature, is to adopt a team teaching approach, whereby a regular English teacher (possibly with experience of ESP teaching) works in tandem with a field specialist, deciding course goals, selecting suitable materials, and perhaps even teaching classes together (Dudley-Evans, 1998). The danger here, however, is that the field specialist may monopolize decisions, despite their limited knowledge of ESP in general. This is especially true if the English teacher starts believing everything the field specialist says (Swales, 1990). Also, in many cases, time constraints, institutional politics, and/or differing expectations make team teaching impractical (Barron, 1992). What results in many institutes is that field specialists may play a role in deciding how many ESP courses should be offered in a department, determining what the overall goals of the courses should be, e.g. "teach students how to read research papers," and perhaps even hiring teachers. However, finer details such as selecting materials selection, deciding grammar and vocabulary goals, and creating tests procedures are largely left up to the individual ESP teachers.

The reality presented above is both good news and bad news for traditional ESP teachers. The good news is that it means they should not feel inferior to field specialists, or be dictated to by field specialists on how ESP courses should be developed and run. If they are true experts in ESP, teachers should know the strengths and weaknesses of their students, and understand the principles of good course design, teaching, and testing. Subsequently, they can design courses that meet the specific needs of students and maximize learning in a way that no field expert could. Unfortunately, the reality is that many ESP teachers cannot claim to have such an expert status in their own field of English language teaching. For this reason, they perhaps have little option but to accept the views of field experts, who at least have a deep understanding of the target field, and often have acquired the target language to a better degree than the ESP teachers themselves.

The bad news for most ESP teachers is that they are left with the difficult task of deciding the "what to teach." For example, if an ESP teacher has to design a new course for nursing students, what aspects of nursing English should be covered? Many ESP teachers

adopt the simplest solution, i.e., choose a published textbook on nursing English and follow this rigidly in class. As Anthony (1998) argues, however, such an approach is not in line with the basic principles of ESP. Unless a teacher is extremely fortunate, no published textbook will exactly match the needs of the target students or the goals of a particular course. An ESP teacher has a responsibility to identify the needs of students and develop materials that allow students to attain the goals of the course. In this paper, I will argue that the difficult situation facing many ESP teachers gives them a unique opportunity to develop a successful course by adopting what I call the "teacher as student" approach to ESP course design. In the rest of this paper, I will describe the approach, providing concrete examples in the field of nursing. Although the focus of this paper is nursing, the principles are general and I believe can be applied in the development of any ESP course.

The "Teacher as Student": Overview

Teachers of ESP courses are in a unique position when compared to regular teachers. Regular teachers can assume a somewhat 'expert' status regarding the subject, and thus can choose to either impart their knowledge on students through lecture style teaching or guide students using discussion-based approaches. ESP teachers, on the other hand, are on a more equal playing field with their students (Bell, 2002). For example, the teacher will undoubtedly know more about the language through which meaning is negotiated, but the students often have a greater understanding of the core concepts, and depending on their age, even some of the conventions and idiosyncrasies of the discourse community (Swales, 1990).

In this situation, an ESP class can be successful if teachers are honest about their role in the classroom and do not try to deceive students into believing they are all knowing experts in the field. On the contrary, in many ways ESP teachers are also just students of the target field. Like the regular students, they would like to learn more about the language and conventions of the field. Like regular students, they also face difficulties interpreting the target language, and can learn a great deal by listening to the views of other students. Of course, they can also contribute greatly to discussions on meaning using their vast knowledge of English. In other words, the teacher is in many ways like a student, only with different skills and knowledge. In the context of a more general ESP course, where the English of various specialist subjects is under discussion, the parallels are even closer.

Students in Asian countries often tend to be concerned about the weaknesses of ESP teachers, and even worry about their own elevated status in an ESP classroom. However, as demonstrated by the rapid growth in contributions to YouTube, MySpace, and other recent Internet sites, once students realize they can make a valuable contribution in the classroom, they soon begin to emphatically contribute to the class and ultimately become a major contributing factor of a more successful course. What can result from this level playing field

are lively, relevant, and useful discussions that lead to a deeper understanding of not only of the target language, but also the target community and its conventions.

Preparing for an ESP Lesson on Nurse-Patient Interaction

To illustrate how the unique relationship between ESP teachers and students can lead to increased learning in the classroom, in this section of the paper I will showing how an ESP teacher might proceed when preparing for a lesson on the language of nurse-patient interactions. At each stage in the process, I hope to show how the reduced status of the teacher, and the elevated status of students gives rise to an improved class.

Goals of the lesson: Why teach the language of nurse-patient interaction?

Establishing the needs of students and subsequently the goals of a class are the foundation of any effective ESP course (Hutchison & Waters, 1987; Dudley-Evans, 1998). However, following the "teacher as student" approach, ESP teachers cannot immediately assume they know what students need (a trap many field experts fall into when creating specialized content courses). Besides, knowing that the teacher is a non-expert, students will be less willing to believe the teacher when he/she says " nurse-patient interaction " is important anyway. To deal with this problem, the teacher first needs to establish the needs of the student rigorously through consultations with field experts, observations of actual nursing practices, references to the literature, and so on. Then, the teacher can present these results to students in order to explain why the chosen topic will receive class time. Clearly, students should always be aware of why they are studying a particular issue, and so by assuming this lower status, the teacher is in a better position to explain it. Going further, the teacher may at the start of a course ask students to investigate what the language requirements of the field are, and then through joint discussion with students, prioritize these as the basis of the entire curriculum (Ashraf Rizvi, 2005).

For the example of nurse-patient interaction discussed here, one piece of evidence showing the need for skills in this area are the results of a survey of 200 hospitals and nursing schools carried out by Yamanaka and Amino (2000) This survey revealed that 92.4% of the hospitals that replied felt English was necessary, and that 92.8% felt there was a great need for nurses to speak with patients and their families. In fact, the results of this survey led me to choose nurse-patient interaction as the example for this paper. Presenting such results to students before engaging them in tasks relating to nurse-patient interactions will undoubtedly lead to increased motivation, which can then lead to higher task completion rates, and increased learning (Meloni, 1998; Norris-Holt, 2001).

Lesson materials: a corpus-based approach

One of the greatest shifts in English education that has occurred in recent years is the shift from intuition-based materials development to corpus-based materials development. In the past, non-specialist ESP teachers had little option but to either follow the contents of a published textbook (chosen either based on recommendations or intuition), or trust the judgments and intuitions of field specialists. In the day-to-day management of classes, if a student had a question, teachers would often feel obliged to either delay answering the question until they consulted with someone who "knew the answer," or simply guess the answer, again, based on their intuition. This latter strategy could, of course, backfire if the student later discovered that the answer was actually wrong.

Now, however, with the increasing amount of electronically stored data available via specialized corpora and Internet resources, teachers can adopt a more rigorous approach to materials selection. Rather than simply following the contents of textbooks or intuitions of field specialists, teachers can locate real-world samples of target language, and then analyze these to find new and interesting patterns of language usage (Thomas & Short, 1996). In the classroom, students are far more likely to believe the "teacher as student" and follow their suggestions, because the teachers can show this evidence to demonstrate that what they say is really true.

To illustrate this approach in the context of developing materials for a class on the English of nurse-patient interactions, I consulted the British National Corpus (BNC), a 100 million word corpus of language that represents language use in a variety of situations in British life. Within this corpus, 119 samples of medical consultations can be found, totaling 86,567 words. Admittedly, many of these samples are doctor-patient interactions, and so a more careful search for examples of nurse-patient interactions would normally be required. However, despite the limitations of the data used here, the principles are the same.

Figure 1 shows one of the samples taken from the corpus. Before class, the ESP teacher could analyze this and other samples to arrive at a general picture of the language of nurse-patient interactions. Even from the single example in Figure 1, it is clear that the interactions contain very few technical words. This is probably a surprising result for any teacher or student of the course. Rather than using highly technical medical terminology, the interactions use highly idiomatic and conversational phrases such as "haven't the foggiest", "see what's going on," and " she was young and all".

More detailed analyses of such data can be achieved with dedicated corpus tools, such as AntConc (Anthony, 2007) and AntVocabCheck (Anthony, 2007). Using AntConc, for example, a teacher can quickly identify many of the key phrases in the interactions, such as "I don't think it's....," "Let's have a look at....," "Let's see if we can....," and "Now what can I do for [you today]" (see Figure 2). The software can also be used to find how words are used in

A: What's worrying you?
B: Och, I don't know. I haven't the foggiest.
A: Have...
B: I feel awfully depressed as well.
A: Right.
B: Whether it's this pain that's doing it I know I don't know.
A: Let's get this head of your x-rayed and see what's going on.
B: I don't know what's causing it. Just not going away, even the tablets that you gave me, they wasn't even taking it away, it, away like .
A: The ...?
B: Aye, I mean for a while I think it was maybe my glasses, but these are just new
A: No.
B: lenses I've got.
A: Now then.
B: I thought the change of life would be starting on me as well. Well this is the other thing that could be starting.
A: Ah.
B: You're a bit young.
A: Ah but even me ma me mammy she was young and all, she was thirty seven.
B: She was just thirty seven, was she ?

Figure 1. Medical consultation extract taken from the British National Corpus (File index: FXD).

A = General practitioner; B = Patient.

particularly contexts. For example, Figure 3 shows a listing of some of the most frequent usages of the phrase "blood pressure," revealing that "blood pressure" often collocates with "check" as in the phrase "let me check your blood pressure" or "I need to check your blood pressure". Many other tools are available in AntConc providing detailed analyses of the texts that go far beyond the scope of this paper.

With AntVocabCheck, a teacher can establish the vocabulary difficult of the interactions, and subsequently set vocabulary goals for students. For example, AntVocabCheck reveals that if students know the most frequent 2000 words of English, they will know around 95% of all the words used in the interaction shown in Figure 1. (see Figure 4). In addition, the only words in the extract that are outside of the 2000 word level are: "ay," "depress," "foggiest," "lens," "ma," "tablet," and "x-rayed."

The main point here, however, is that the "teacher as student", being a non-expert in the field, must adopt a rigorous approach to materials selection. This leads to more reliable, higher quality materials that students can identify with and see the relevance of. Also, the "teacher as student" must explain to students the rational behind materials selection leading to an even deeper understanding of the target language and field in general.

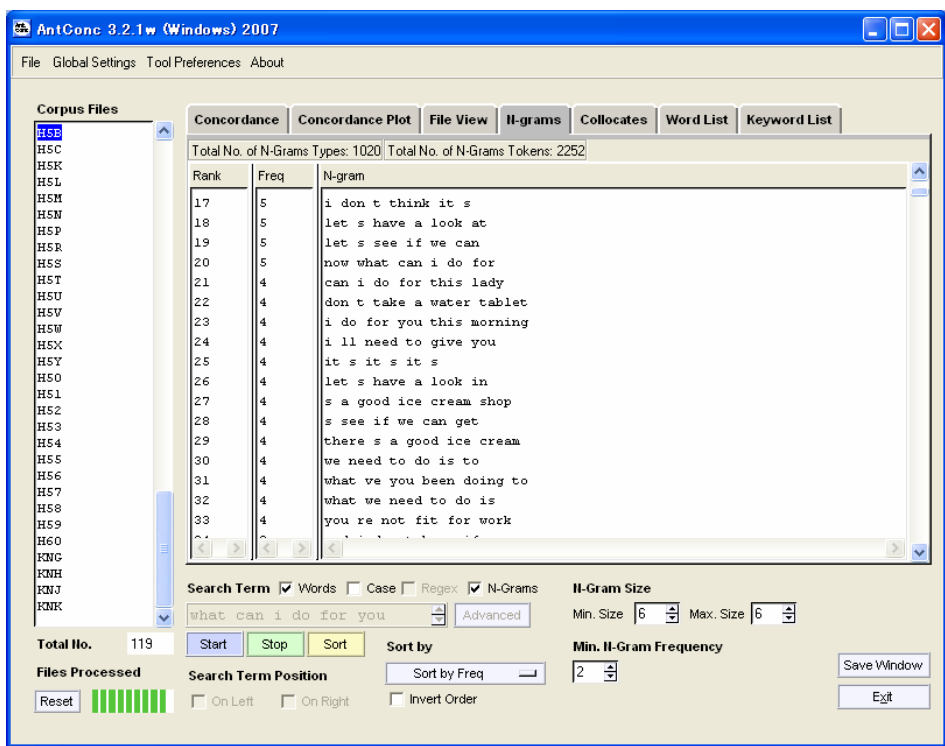


Figure 2. Screenshot of AntConc version 3.2.1w. The list shows a frequency ranked list of 6-word phrases from a corpus of 119 medical consultations.

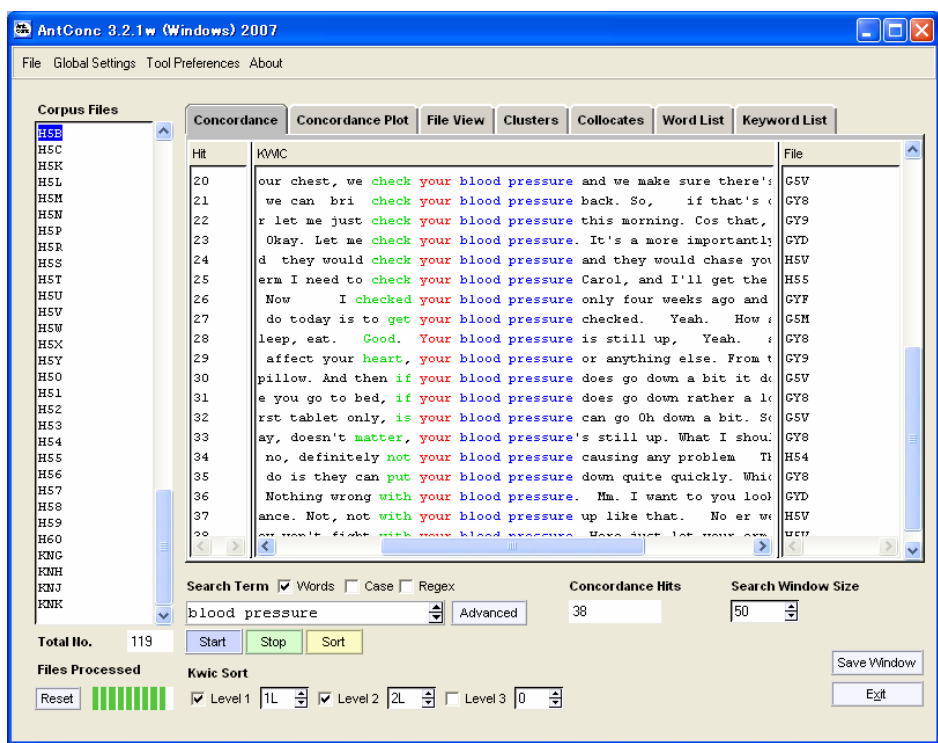


Figure 3. Screenshot of AntConc version 3.2.1w. The list shows examples sentences including the phrase "blood pressure." At the top of the list, six occurrences of "check your blood pressure" can be seen.

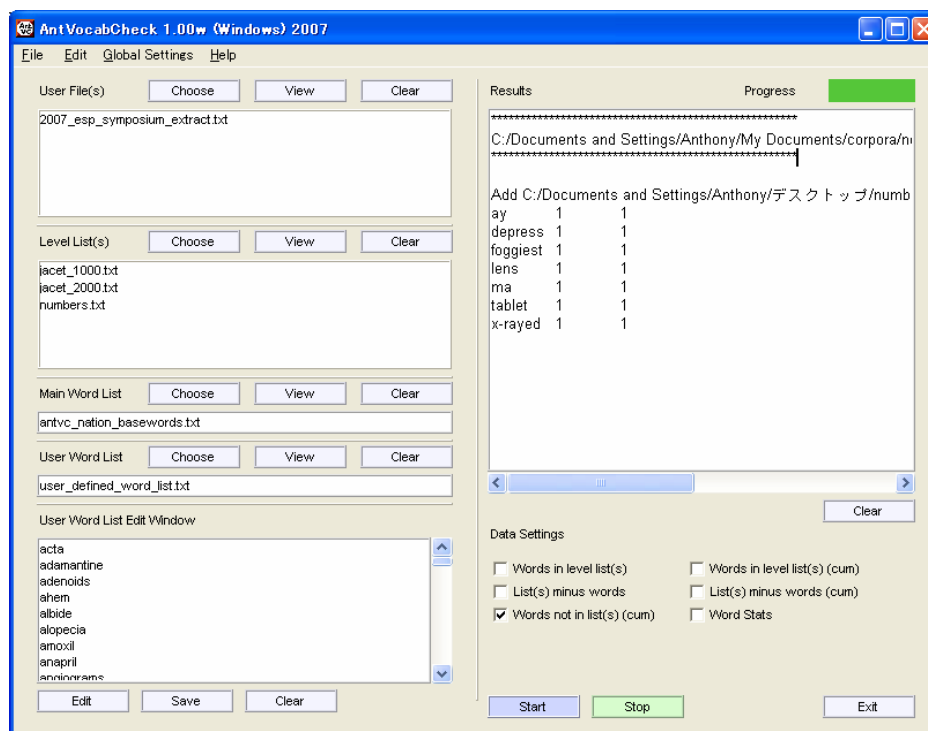


Figure 4. Screenshot of AntVocabCheck version 1.00w. The list shows the base forms of all words in the Figure 1 extract that are not included in the most frequent 2000 words of English.

Classroom methods: a student-centered approach

Once the ESP teacher has established some of the key features of the target texts that will become the core components in the classroom, it is necessary to formulate a way to present the information to students so that it maximizes learning. One approach that can be effective is the data-driven approach to learning suggested by (Johns, 1991, 1994). Here, rather than simply give students explicit rules and insights on language usage, the teacher encourages students to formulate and test their own hypotheses based on the real-world data. Again, the "teacher as student" is in one of the best positions to promote this approach as they have had to go through the same process themselves when developing the original class materials. The insights they have gained, and the strategies they have used to formulate their findings are all relevant and useful to students. More importantly, by gaining the analytic skills needed to process such texts, students can deal with new materials they are exposed to long after the course has finished, for example, in the workplace.

In the context of teaching the English of nurse-patient interactions, one possibility, therefore, is to show the original raw sample texts to students, and ask them to analyze and form options on them. As part of such an exercise, teachers could explain to students where to find relevant corpora, or ask students to create their own specialized corpora. Students will also need instructions on how to download and use corpus tools. In this way, corpora and

corpus tools can become as familiar to students as common dictionaries. Experience has shown that students, especially in the sciences, very quickly adapt to this approach and soon begin to make important observations that contribute to everyone's improved understanding.

Discussion

In this paper, I have proposed that teachers of ESP courses can capitalize on their non-expert status in the target field, by adopting a so-called "teacher as student" approach to course development. Rather than being a limitation or weakness, an initial lack of knowledge about the target field on the part of the teacher can paradoxically lead to a greater understanding of the needs of students, a more rigorous approach to materials selection, and a more dynamic, student centered set of in-class activities. It is important that teachers do not try to hide their weaknesses, but instead, discuss them openly with students. In many ways, they are just another member of the team; they can learn from students, but also contribute to increased student understanding by explaining the methods and strategies they used during class preparation.

As part of this process, I have also argued for a more important role of corpora and corpus tools in the preparation and delivery of ESP materials. Corpora can provide real-world, concrete examples of the target language features, and together with corpus tools, can be a source of valuable information about the target specialist language, just as traditional dictionaries are useful in the study of general English. After an ESP course has finished, most students will no longer have access to an expert in the language of their target field. This is also true in the workplace. What they need, therefore, are tools that will help them to discover features of language on their own. An ESP course that introduces such tools, and encourages students to use these tools to carry out learner-centered analyses of target language will ultimately provide students with the necessary skills that will serve them well throughout their professional lives.

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