

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background and Rationale

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has a long history in the field of English teaching. Little research has been done however on just how effective an ESP course is in regards to comparing it with a general English course. Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) and Hutchinson and Waters (1987) wrote very detailed books which are viewed as seminal texts in the field. In these books however, there was no question of comparing results from a study of how students feel an ESP course caters not just to their immediate needs but their wants and desires for English in the future.

The question therefore to ask is whether a typical course with just a series of units based on hotel language from an ESP textbook meets students want and needs fully and if a general English course taught in conjunction with the ESP course is found to at least equal or perhaps even surpass the students attitudes toward their compulsory course of study. Also of interest is whether the students would like to see greater weighting toward one component of an equally taught course consisting of 50% ESP English and 50% general English.

Jasso-Aguilar (1998) researched hotel maids studying an ESP course. She used critically aware methodology, which included working alongside the hotel maids in her study. She discovered a mismatch between what the hotel wanted its maids to learn and what they needed to learn.

She also questioned whether the language being learned met the long term goals of the hotel housekeepers. Since this study there have been no further studies carried out in hotels to examine students' attitudes toward the taught components of their courses.

From the early 1960's, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has grown to become one of the most prominent areas of EFL teaching today. It is driven often by stakeholders, and sometimes by material writers. An examination of ESP textbooks today would find a huge variety of ESP textbooks designed for example not just for Business English, but now for Marketing, Banking and Advertising English. ESP has a history of almost 40 years and so you would expect the ESP community to have a clear idea about what ESP means.

The division of ESP into absolute and variable characteristics (See Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998) in particular, was initially very helpful in resolving arguments about what is and is not ESP. We can see that ESP is not necessarily concerned with a specific discipline, nor does it have to be aimed at a certain age group or ability range. However, in my opinion one of the main differences between ESP and general English is that the vast majority of ESP courses are studied by adults. ESP should be seen as an 'approach' to teaching, or what Dudley-Evans describes as an 'attitude of mind'. This is a similar conclusion to that made by Hutchinson et al. (1987, p.19) 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.'*

If we agree with this definition we begin to see how broad ESP really is. In fact, one may ask 'What is the difference between the ESP and general English approach?' Hutchinson et al. (1987, p.53) answer this quite simply, *"in theory nothing, in practice a great deal"*. When their book was written at that time, teachers of general English courses,

while acknowledging that students had a specific purpose for studying English, would rarely conduct a needs analysis to find out what was necessary to actually achieve it.

Teachers nowadays though, are much more aware of the importance of needs analysis, and certainly today materials writers are more aware than they used to be about the goals of learners during material production. Perhaps this demonstrates the influence that the ESP approach has had on English teaching in general. Clearly the line between where general English courses stop and ESP courses start has become very vague. Anthony (1997, p.2) states that *'Rather ironically, while many General English teachers can be described as using an ESP approach, basing their syllabi on a learner needs analysis and their own specialist knowledge of using English for real communication, it is the majority of so-called ESP teachers that are using an approach furthest from that described above'*.

What he means by this is that today many ESP teachers and courses are now based around a certain textbook without looking closely at learners' needs or wants. A proper review of materials from the textbook may be lacking and actually conducting work-based research into finding target language structures is seldom done. It almost could be said that it is the very success of ESP English that is now driving the failure of courses for students.

If this is the case, then perhaps just teaching a specific textbook designed for the hotel and catering trade while meeting the needs and expectations of hotel management will not meet the needs and expectations of the individual students. Clearly a hotel will want their employee to be able to function in their role, but may have no further desire for overall proficiency in English.

Although it can be argued rightly that in the case of hotel English textbooks much of the language could belong to a general English textbook, it is the narrow-beam focus that

sets it apart from a general English textbook. In a hotel ESP textbook, every unit is based on a target situation that could happen in a particular setting or target situation.

This issue whether to focus on a 'common core' or to design a course with more specific aims is one that holds a central place in debate about ESP courses today.

This study examined a typical group of employees in a five-star hotel chain and examined their motivations and attitudes with perhaps giving directions for how employers and training managers can design English courses in cooperation with instructors to better suit employees' wants and needs. Giving employees' motivation to learn English, especially intrinsic motivation is of long term benefit to the employers, as self-directed learning is enhanced if learners want to learn for themselves.

Research Questions

Is teaching an ESP specific component designed for hotel workers received more positively than a general English component in regards to the students' attitudes?

Sub-problems

What are the management feelings about the general English component?

Will students feel that the outcomes of the ESP component furthered their mastery of language needed for their present job and future careers?

Do students think that the ESP component or the general English component empowers them more?

Ultimately was there a significant difference between students' attitudes to both components or were students happy to study both ESP and general English at the same time?

Purposes of the Study

From the above discussion, the purposes of this study are to investigate hotel employees' attitudes with regards to their:

- 1) General English component taught using a general English pre-intermediate textbook.
- 2) English for Specific purposes component taught using a pre-intermediate hotel and catering textbook.
- 3) The results of these analyses being used to evaluate and compare the two components and see if they have equal weighting for the students or whether one component was significantly better for the students than the other.
- 4) To make conclusions for stakeholders, ESP practitioners, and English instructors when designing courses for hotel employees in the future.

Significance of the Study

A large amount of training for hotel employees is carried out annually throughout the world in English. Being the international language of travel, employees especially in hotel chains are expected to be able to communicate with guests in English. However there is frequently a mismatch between what employers, employees and guests expect with regards to English. Guests might wish and expect that all employees have a general ability in English and can communicate about a number of topics. Hotels might expect their employees to show expertise within their specific roles in the hotel but no further. The employees themselves might wish to gain not just English for their immediate role, but future possibilities in the hospitality sector, and also a level of competence in general

communicative English which requires them to be able to talk about a number of different topics and to deal with different situations that might arise.

I set out to teach a course of general English and specific hotel English to a group of hotel workers at a five-star hotel in Chiang Mai, Thailand and assessed them using mainly qualitative means to find out just how big a difference there is with student attitudes between the two components.

Clearly this research study would benefit instructors when designing an ESP course. A key question in ESP courses is whether to have a broad-focus or narrow-focus approach (see literature review) when designing a syllabus. I hope that my research will also inform stakeholders and instructors choices for the future.

Definition of Terms

Component: the classes taught at the hotel consisted of two separate distinct components, the general English component using a standard EFL textbook and a specific English component using a textbook designed for Hotel and Tourism workers and students. Each class was taught using one component only.

Specific English component: all the units studied are from a textbook designed for hotel workers. Nearly all units had a focus on communicative English in target situations within a hotel setting. Units studied were decided upon by both participants and instructor.

General English component: all the sections taught were from a pre-intermediate level course book. The course book is of 'general' English design practicing all four English skills, reading and writing, speaking and listening. It contains a variety of topics. Similar to the hotel component, sections studied were decided upon by negotiation.

It should be mentioned that due to the nature of their job roles there was some cross-over between the books. For example the participants studied giving directions and having

job interviews in the ESP component. In the general English component participants studied dining out in a restaurant and waiter/guest vocabulary.

Students' attitudes: This refers to their motivation to learn, the enjoyment they gain from the classes. The amount of intrinsic or extrinsic motivation they feel for each component when studying. How closely does each component match their particular wants and needs? Did they feel a class or a component met their expectations?

PAYYAP UNIVERSITY