

## English Language Teaching Materials for Adult Courses: ESP Approach or ESL Approach?

### Introduction

Most universities in Sri Lanka teach English for all the students as a compulsory subject. At the same time in certain fields such as Medicine and Engineering the universities use English as the sole medium of instructions. Even though mother tongue is used as the medium of instructions in certain subject areas such as Sociology and History, most of the literature in such fields are also in English. Therefore, the students should at least be able to use the materials available in English. Hence, the English teachers who work in the universities have to face the challenge of making the students competent in English to work as well as continue their higher studies with the help of English language.

There is a gap between the expected level of English knowledge and possessed knowledge among the university students, so the teachers have to put an extra effort to brush up the English language competencies before starting their degree programmes. Therefore, most of these institutions conduct intensive English programmes and continue teaching English while the undergraduates are engaged in their academic studies.

A key issue to be addressed here is the teaching materials that are used in such programmes. Unlike the school syllabus in which a standard set of text books are provided, the universities have to decide on their own materials. Further, there is no set procedure for all the universities to have a standard set of English teaching materials. As a result various universities use different materials and those are also subject to change very often.

There is also a difference in the approach used in material preparation for English courses at universities. Certain universities use general English language teaching materials (which are also called English as a Second Language or ESL materials) while others use specific English language teaching materials (which are called English for Specific Purposes or ESP materials) produced based on different fields. Some English teachers believe that general English language teaching materials are sufficient in teaching English in the universities but some argue that English language teaching materials used in the universities should be produced to cater to the needs of particular fields or disciplines.

### Literature Review

Not only in Sri Lanka but also internationally linguists are interested in finding out the best approach which should be used in developing English language teaching materials for adult courses. They discuss two approaches: Register Analysis and an approach different to Register Analysis (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). In Register Analysis attention is paid on grammar patterns and surface structure of the language used in different fields. Therefore, the materials are developed based on the surface structure which differs from one field to the other. For example if the aim is to teach report writing, materials are developed for different fields depending on the kinds of reports required for each field: medical reports, financial reports etc. Discourse analysis has also become an important aspect in this regard (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987). This is also recognised as English for Specific Purposes (ESP).

In the second approach which differs from Register Analysis, attention is paid on developing language skills such as scanning, skimming etc. which are not subject specific but universal. In this approach materials are produced based on general language skills without making them subject specific (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). For example if the aim is to teach report writing, general format and language components used in any report are taught without specifying reports as financial, medical etc. Learners are expected to use the acquired knowledge to suit in different fields. Hence, the materials are based on general English components. This approach is also identified as English as a Second Language (ESL).



Hutchinson and Waters explain three major differences between ESL and ESP.

- a. The first difference is that in ESP the subject matter discussed, sentences used, vocabulary, and tasks are related to a particular field or discipline. For example a lawyer might learn how to write a policy paper, a brief and also negotiation skills and effective techniques for oral presentations.
- b. The second difference is that "ESP programmes use printed and audio-visual materials that are specially designed to meet the needs of a specific group of learners, usually adults. Typical ESP textbooks are *English for Corporate Communications* and *English for Information Systems*." (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987)
- c. According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987) the cost of an ESP programme is higher than that of an ESL programme due to the specialized teaching, requiring professionals, the broad range of supporting activities and facilities provided. The duration of such courses can also vary depending on the type of skills necessary for the learners.

According to Lorenzo Fiorito (2005), in ESP programmes attention is paid on language in context than on teaching grammar and language structures.

It covers subjects varying from accounting or computer science to tourism and business management. The focal point of ESP is that English is not taught as a subject separated from the students' real world (or wishes); instead, it is integrated into a subject matter area important to the learners. (Fiorito, 2005, p.1)

He further points out that generally in ESL all four language skills; listening, reading, speaking, and writing are stressed equally but in ESP it is a needs analysis that determines which language skills are most needed by the students, and the syllabus is designed accordingly. For example an ESP programme can be aimed at developing writing skills in students who are reading for degrees in English medium or one of them can be aimed at developing speaking skills for tourist guides (Fiorito, 2005).

### **Background**

General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University is the only defence university in Sri Lanka where officer cadets of Army, Navy and Air Force are studying for their first degrees in Engineering, Management and Technical Sciences, Commerce and Arts in the English medium. Being military students these cadets have to complete a course in military studies which is conducted in the English medium as well. Apart from these, the day-to-day communication in the University is done in English. Hence, students have a critical need to learn English. They need it for various kinds of activities ranging from day-to-day communication to academic studies.

Due to such reasons English is considered a compulsory subject for all the officer cadets. There is an initial intensive course in English for three months soon after they are enlisted. The overall aim of the intensive course is to allow the students to achieve the level of competence to study and work in English at the University. Afterwards, they have to study English for four semesters in the first and second years of their degree programmes.

The Department of Languages, which handles all the English courses conducted at the Kotelawala Defence University, has developed their own teaching materials for all the courses. There are separate materials for the intensive programme and other programmes and most of the materials are based on ESL approach. Even though there is a belief that subject specific English language teaching materials are required to study different subjects in English and work in English, it is hypothesised that the general English teaching materials (ESL) are sufficient enough for the students in the University to achieve the learning goals. Further, it is believed that these students have the ability to convert the acquired knowledge in the general English courses to meet the requirements in different fields.





### Content Analysis

The intensive course runs for 288 hours in twelve weeks. However, teaching materials are developed only for ten weeks covering 240 hours. The teaching materials are comprised of ten modules, each designed for 24 hours which are aimed at teaching general English. The first seven modules are based on themes: Getting to Know You, Leisure, Arts, Sports, Love and Marriage, Nature and Countries. The last three modules are on Technology, Military and Human Rights. The last three have the qualities of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Almost all the modules have activities to practice general English competencies: four skills, grammar and vocabulary. Even though some activities are specifically designed to practise separate skills, most activities practise a combination of skills.

#### a. Language Components Included in the Materials

The ten modules are included with the following skills and sub skills.

**Study Skills:** dictionary skills, vocabulary skills

**Listening:** listening for specific information, listening for gist, receiving instructions, listening to predictions/opinions, different accents, listening to/following orders

**Speaking:** pronunciation: monophthongs, diphthongs and consonants, descriptions, interviewing, dialogues, analyzing, rationalizing, giving/receiving instructions, giving future predictions/opinions, debating skills, giving advice, speeches, reporting, ordering,

**Reading:** scanning, skimming, deducing meaning from the text,

**Writing:** paragraphs, bio-data, descriptive writing, bar/pie chart description, giving instructions, giving advice, report writing, summarizing, creative writing, essay writing

**Grammar:** parts of speech: nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, and interjections, question formation, 'if' clauses, tenses, active/ passive voice, comparatives/ superlatives, modals, singular/ plurals

Modules 1-7 do not contain any specific lesson related to subject areas that the students study in their academic programme. However, Modules 8-10 have lessons related to the subjects that the students study. Based on the content it is decided that Modules 1-7 belong to ESL category and 8-10 belong to ESP category.

#### b. Material Evaluation

Forty students from all the four streams: Engineering, Management and Technical Sciences, Commerce and Arts participated in the study by completing a questionnaire based on the materials evaluated. The questionnaire was based on analyzing whether students prefer ESP materials or ESL materials.

The first question in the questionnaire was whether the topics of the modules should be changed and only 15% of the surveyed student population from all the four streams agreed that topics should be changed, but 20% remained neutral and 65% did not agree. This reveals that the topics included in the Modules are satisfactory enough for the students.

Most students in the Commerce stream said that materials specific to the Commerce stream should be included. This can be due to the fact that lessons relevant to Commerce stream are not included in the modules at all. The Arts stream is satisfied with the materials included and half of the Engineering and MTS students also prefer more materials in their respective fields. However, they do not agree to change the topics also. Hence, a question arises as to find out where and how to include subject specific materials.

When the question on the favourite module was asked none of the students selected Modules 8 and 10 which are subject specific or designed based on the ESP approach. All selected the other modules which have general (ESL) topics. Most of the students, despite the stream, liked the third module which is 'Arts'. Further, when the students were asked to select their preference from Modules 1-7 (general themes or ESL) and 8-10 (subject specific themes or

ESP) 75% selected Module 1-7 and 25% selected Module 8-10.

The fifth question was to find out whether the students' learning objectives were fulfilled in the modules. 95% of the surveyed student population from all the four streams agreed with this view. From the survey results, it was obvious that the prevailing materials are sufficient enough to improve the English language skills necessary for the students in this University.

A test analysis was done to find out whether there is an improvement in the students after completing the Intensive Course. Here, the placement test (which was conducted before the commencement of the Intensive Course) marks and the final examination (conducted after the Intensive Course) marks of the surveyed student population were compared.

According to the pre and post examination marks of the ten MTS students, the median value of their pre test was 44.9 and 57.4 in the post test. In the Engineering stream the median value of the pre test was 45.4 and 61.7 in the post test. Pre test median value of the Commerce Stream was 42.4 and the post test median was 58.4. In the Arts stream in the pre test students have scored 40.3 as the median value and in the post test, 58.3. The results of the test analysis also provided enough facts to prove that the intensive course was able to improve the English language skills of the students. The median value of the marks in all the streams in the final examination was higher than that of the placement test.

### Conclusions

Based on the analysis the conclusions drawn were that teaching materials for the Intensive English course should not be changed depending on the various fields of study. Majority of the surveyed population in each stream preferred the prevailing materials and they do not wish them to be changed. However, some materials relevant to each field (to develop technical vocabulary and writing) could be included. Further, more materials relevant to the Commerce stream should be included, but it is not clear how it should be done. Hence, a conclusion that can be drawn is to include some reading texts relevant to the Commerce stream.

Before the study it was hypothesised that the general English teaching materials or ESL materials were sufficient enough for the students in the University to achieve their learning goals in different fields. Further, it was believed that these students have the ability to convert the acquired knowledge in the general English courses to meet the requirements in different fields. As discussed above, what was hypothesised was true and correct. The general English teaching materials (ESP) were sufficient enough for the students to achieve the competency required in English. There was no specific need to develop materials based on the ESP approach. Further, even the students preferred and believed that ESL materials were better than ESP materials. However, it is better to include certain amount of materials relevant to the respective field of study especially to develop technical vocabulary knowledge. A suggestion can be to include a separate vocabulary section to each module.

### Limitations

Even though General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University is the only defence university in Sri Lanka, the students' necessity of English in the field of military was not taken into consideration in the study. The students do almost all their activities in the English medium under strict military rules and regulations which makes English their first language in the University. It will be interesting to analyse whether they need English relevant to military than English relevant to specific streams of study. Since the University has some English text books such as *Campaign* and *Breakthrough* which are related to military, it will be useful to study the relevance of such materials for the students.



Further, there are higher educational institutes for military studies such as Sri Lanka Military Academy at Diyathalawa, Naval and Maritime Academy in China-Bay, Air Force Training School at Ekala etc. Some of these institutes use parts of the intensive English course materials developed by Kotelawala Defence University as a pilot project. Therefore, this research can be extended to such institutes to find out the relevance and appropriateness of the materials for them and also generally for all the military students.

### References

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