

2. THE ESP COMPONENT IN APPLIED LINGUISTICS: A BRITISH VIEW

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A quality that is often ascribed to the British is that of pragmatism. Another quality which I think is an equally important ingredient in the British character is what I would call the bulldog quality - a mixture of tenacity and somewhat aggressive scepticism. These two qualities are particularly apparent in British academics and help to account for the way in which Applied Linguistics has developed in Britain. Henry Sweet might be considered the father of Applied Linguistics in Britain. His book 'The Practical Study of Languages' was first published in 1899 and his ideas set the direction of the discipline. His pragmatism is the basis of his thought. In the introduction to his book he states, "I start from the axiom that as languages have to be learned, even if it turns out that the process injures the mind, our first business is to find out the most efficient and economical way of learning them."

The idea of second language learning being a process that might injure the mind might strike us as a bit strange nowadays, but it is an idea that I shall return to later in this paper. The 'bull dog' quality in Sweet comes out in his attacks on the language teaching methods that had been in vogue at different times in the nineteenth century. Of these he says, "There is a constant succession of them; Ollendorff, Ahn, Prendergast, Gouin - to mention only a few - have all had their day. They have all failed to keep a permanent hold on the public mind because they have all failed to perform what they promised: after promising impossibilities they have turned out to be, on the whole, no better than the older methods... (They) are failures because they are based on an insufficient knowledge of the science of language and because they are one-sided."

H.E. Palmer continues very much in the Sweet tradition in his book "The Scientific Study and Teaching of Languages" first published in 1917, when he states, "If the study of language is a science then definite and complete answers must exist to a vast number of vexed questions of which the following are specimens: What is the function of the teacher? - of the pupil? - of the book? - of the exercise? What do you understand by Translation? by Grammar? by Semantics? by Function? by Words? by (Direct) Method?"

Palmer's conclusion: "The science of language study does not exist, but it is high time that it should exist."

I find it rather depressing that over sixty years after Palmer's observations, during which time Applied Linguistics has become academically respectable and a widespread area of study and research, we are still asking very much the same questions.

Applied Linguistics has had to fight particularly hard for academic respectability in Britain. It was only in the 1960's that universities offered courses in the teaching of English as a second language, and then almost entirely at the level of a diploma course, and often with grave misgivings on the part of the Linguistics departments under whose control the TESL courses came. But, here again, British pragmatism saved the day. I think that Applied Linguistics developed in Britain through the universities because the language teaching business grew significantly in the 1960's and 70's and there was a need to train an increasing number of teachers. As the business grew it was taken more seriously and the first generation of university trained TESL practitioners were recalled from the field to teach the increasing number of courses being opened now at MA and PhD level. Through this process, the study of second language learning and teaching has eventually found itself in its own right, and is perhaps only now beginning to deal systematically with the questions raised by Palmer at the turn of the century.

The teaching of ESP has had a considerable part to play in the development of Applied Linguistics in Britain in recent years and in the greater respectability it now enjoys.

There are several reasons why this is so, and it is these reasons that I want to examine now.

One of the main reasons is the increasing number of people who need to learn English not as part of their general education, but as a necessary tool in their specialist studies in areas of science and technology and in a wide range of professional and occupational fields. This reflects the growing use of English as an international language, and it calls for a considerable change in the methods and attitudes to teaching English as a second language. As Peter Strevens puts it: "... there has been a major change in recent years, away from the earlier assumption of language teaching as a handmaiden of literary studies, first towards a conception of teaching and learning the practical command of a language unrelated to aspects of culture, and more recently towards the notion that the teaching of a language can with advantage be deliberately matched to the specific needs and purposes of the learner." Thus one of the main challenges in Applied Linguistics in recent years has been to devise new syllabuses, new teaching materials and new, or at least more varied methodologies to cater for a wide variety of students with different needs and different priorities.

Another reason why ESP has become an important component in Applied Linguistics is that, because it represents a new emphasis in language teaching, it calls for a great deal of research, and much of the research needed corresponds to recent changes of interest in the field of Linguistics. Here, there has been generally a movement away from a central preoccupation with the structure of the sentence and the

abstract concept of the native speaker's grammatical competence and a greater preoccupation with discourse, the description of linguistic units larger than the sentence, both in written and spoken language, and also a greater preoccupation with the way language is used to convey meaning, with our communicative rather than with our grammatical competence.

It is these same issues that are of central concern to the teaching of ESP. Certainly it is no accident that the work being done in three of the main centres of Applied Linguistics in Britain today is devoted to research of immediate interest to special purpose language teaching and concerns linguistic description. The field of linguistics probably has a closer relationship today to language teaching than it has had since the early days of American Structuralism.

However, linguistic description is only one area amongst many others that is of importance to the teaching of ESP and it is the consideration of the other areas that brings us to the third reason why ESP is an important and indeed a catalytic component in Applied Linguistics.

It is because of the extremely varied nature of ESP, the different types of learner involved, ranging from office boy to nuclear scientist, and the different learning goals that they have, that we are forced to ask ourselves those same questions indicated by Palmer as essential for arriving at a science of language learning and teaching.

"What is the function of the teacher?" In different ESP situations the teacher is likely to have a wide variety of functions. He might well be teaching a course for which no suitable published material is available, and therefore he has to prepare his own course. If this is the case he needs a very different kind of training from that of the general language teacher. He might be working as one of a team with specialists in medicine or engineering whom he needs to consult over questions of content, the appropriateness of texts used in the course and the relationship between the subject matter and the types of exercise that are used. He might find himself teaching not in a traditional type of classroom but in a laboratory or on the factory floor.

Underlying these different functions is the crucial difference in the role of the ESP teacher with regard to the learner and to the content of the teaching materials when compared with the teacher of general English. He might well take on the role of a manager rather than of a teacher in any strong sense of the word. It is quite possible that he will be in a position of inferiority compared with his students in regard to understanding the content of what he is teaching or presenting.

Factors such as these make it necessary to re-examine and re-evaluate the function and role of the teacher, and, as a result, we gain a more comprehensive understanding of the many different variables involved in language teaching.

Palmer's second question was: "What is the function of the pupil?", and here again I think that the experience gained from the teaching of ESP provides insights and involves considerations that are of great importance to the field of Applied Linguistics, to our overall understanding of the factors that play an essential part

in language learning. I have already mentioned the wide variety of learners in ESP situations: the office boy, the nuclear scientist, the illiterate migrant worker, the professor of literary criticism. Within such a range it is to be expected that learning strategies and capabilities will vary enormously, but the fascinating fact that emerges from ESP situations is that anyone is capable of learning a second language if he really needs to, and moreover, learning usually takes place at a fast rate.

Even more importantly, perhaps, our analysis of the function of the ESP learner (or pupil, in Palmer's terms) leads us to consider that rather enigmatic statement made by Sweet: "...even if it turns out that the process injures the mind."

I think there are two ways in which language learning might be considered injurious to the mind in an ESP situation. One would be the type of situation in which the learner is under great pressure to achieve a certain level of mastery in English; perhaps his job, promotion, or his research degree depends upon it. This might well cause him to feel resentful of the fact that he is forced to learn English and this resentment, even when the learner is successful, might lead to a feeling of antipathy towards the language and the culture. At the other end of the scale, one has the attitude of the learner who accepts the importance and prestige of English to such an exaggerated degree that he comes to look down on or perhaps totally reject his own language and culture.

I think it could be claimed that either condition is one that injures the mind. However, these are obviously extremes. The main point is that an analysis of the attitudes or functions of the enormously varied types of ESP learner can have important implications for language planning and the wider issues of glottopolitics and might well lead us to question the desirability of promoting one dominant international language. Such issues are obviously purely speculative.

Let me turn to the final question raised by Palmer which needs an answer if the study of language is to be considered a science.

"What do you understand by Method?"

It is on this question that ESP has rendered the greatest service to Applied Linguistics. I would claim that one can demonstrate more easily within the area of ESP within general language teaching that there is no one method that is best for all situations. Depending on the nature of the learner and the nature of the learning goal one method is going to be more appropriate than another, but in order to arrive at that conclusion we have to come up with very definite answers to those same questions posed by Palmer and this type of analysis certainly forces us to be more scientific in our approach to the whole question of language learning and teaching.

I hope that ESP has finally laid the ghost of The Best Method, a phantom that has haunted Applied Linguistics for far too long. What ESP shows us very clearly in fact is that:

'Ce n'est pas la méthode qui nous manque: ce qui nous manque c'est la base même de la méthode.'