

THE ORIGINS OF ESP

Teaching language for specific purposes (LSP) can be traced as far back as the Greek and Roman empires (Dudley-Evans and ST Johns, 1998:1). In the same vein, Strevens (1977) states that the history of LSP goes back to “at least half a century”. Regarding English for Specific Purposes (ESP), it emerged at the end of Second World War and it “was not a planned and coherent movement, but rather a phenomenon that grew out of a number of converging trends” (Hutchinson and Waters 1987: 6). ESP have functioned and operated in diverse ways around the world, “but we can identify three main reasons common to the emergence of all ESP.”(Ibid, 1987: 6): the demands of a brave new world, a revolution in linguistics and a new focus on the learner.

The demands of a brave new world

After 1945, the New World knew an age of massive and unprecedented growth in all the activities especially the economic, technical and scientific ones, inexorably it engenders a demand for an international language to communicate, and this responsibility was accredited to English for various reasons. Consequently“..., it created a new generation of learners who knew specifically why they were learning a language...”(Hutchinson and Waters (1987: 6) aiming at fulfilling their daily needs which consisted in the comprehension of the simplest brochure or manuals to most complicated genres of discourses as scientific texts .

A revolution in linguistics

Some linguists, being aware of the world changes, began to focus their studies on the ways in which language is used in real situations. Traditional approach in language study centred the attention on the grammatical rules governing the language usage. However, it was found that discourses vary according to contexts. Then, it was necessary to reorganise the teaching and learning methodologies according to the language specificities of each situation. The English needed by engineers, doctors, linguists or officers “could be identified by analyzing the linguistic characteristics of their specialist area of work or study. ‘Tell me what you need English for and I will tell you the English that you need’ became the guiding principle of ESP”. Hutchison and Waters (1987: 8).

Focus on the learner

In the same period learner’s motivation towards acquiring a foreign language was the subject study of the educational psychologists, who noticed the use of different learning strategies by learners; they have different attitudes, needs and interests. The idea was based on the statement of tell me what you need English for and I will tell you the English you need. It was a natural expansion of this philosophy to plan special courses for each range of specific learners. Strevens (1977:152) notes: “...the existence of a major ‘tide’ in the educational thought, in all countries and affecting all subjects. The movement referred to is the global trend towards ‘learner-centered education’”. Like the world, language study and concepts of education fundamentally changed, the English language teaching changed with it, and knew the birth of teaching English for Specific Purposes which is considered as the direct result of the world evolution.

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