

The sudden specialist

Robin Walker has suggestions for the non-specialist teacher faced with specialised needs.

One of the most unnerving moments in the career of many teachers of English is the arrival of their Director of Studies or Head of Department to tell them that they are going to have to teach a group of agricultural engineers, architects, chemists or business studies undergraduates. Mostly trained in humanities, teachers new to English for Academic Purposes (EAP), English for Special Purposes (ESP), or Business English, quite naturally feel intimidated by the prospect of teaching with texts that can be characterised by dense technical vocabulary and often obscure field-specific concepts. Though we now know what *FAQs* are through using the internet ourselves, we may be less at ease on encountering *FABs*, *GDSs*, *SWOT* or *yield analyses*.

Common features

But before we hand in our notice and look for work elsewhere, it is worth remembering that at the heart of all specialist Englishes there lies a core of common features that, as professional language teachers, we are experts in. The most important generic features are familiar terrain for us:

Grammar

Although genre analysis and other related studies have revealed certain differences between different specialist Englishes, especially at discourse level, the actual grammar that students of any field will need is remarkably constant. None of the grammar taught up to upper-intermediate level in general English classes would be out of place in an ESP or related

environment, and we are trained experts in teaching this grammar.

Skills

We are also experts in guiding students to high levels of competence in each of the four language skills, and although some situations would need us to focus more on writing than on speaking, say, we are experts in determining the exact balance of skills work that each student or group requires.

Functions

Once again, our expertise from teaching exam or general English leaves us perfectly equipped to help our specialist learners to achieve the fluency they all desire when putting forward a tentative idea, agreeing a price or rejecting an argument from a peer.

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We should also not lose sight of the fact that many people in academic, professional or business contexts will need to make presentations, to negotiate, to travel and to socialise. All of this implies having strong communication skills in English, and once again, there is nobody better than the trained language

teacher to assist the learner in gaining these skills, or in optimising in English the communication skills they already possess in their mother tongue.

Despite all of the above, teaching English for any specialist purpose can still generate difficulties, and it is to three of these problems, and to potential solutions, that we now turn our attention.

Problem 1: It's a completely new specialism for you.

With English now a *lingua franca* in many academic, professional and business environments, our own profession will be called on more and more to give classes to groups studying one or other of a constantly expanding range of specialisms. Here there are two relatively simple courses of action we can take in order to gain at least a minimal understanding of the specialism's basic concepts and terminology:

1 Use the internet to check the meaning of new concepts/terminology. In particular, for simple but adequate explanations try wikipedia.com and answers.com.

It is also usually possible to find the English translation of a wide range of terms on the internet.

2 Use Amazon, or a similar online book supplier, and buy an undergraduate *introductory* coursebook on the specialism in question, in English and/or the students' mother tongue, if you can speak this. Such introductory coursebooks, though not exactly 'light reading', are usually conceptually well within the intellectual limits of any ELT professional. As a bonus, these

textbooks will also provide:

- additional reading material;
- (probably) additional activities and mini-research projects at the end of each unit or chapter;
- (possibly) addresses of websites with authentic related material – websites of professional bodies, companies, etc.

Problem 2: Your class has students from a variety of different professional backgrounds.

1 Openly discuss the impossibility of teaching to the needs (especially the lexical needs) of one specialism only, and so justify a ‘broad’ approach.

Explain that you will base your lessons on the generic features of all specialist Englishes, namely:

- grammar;
- functions;
- competence in the four skills.

2 Having justified a broad approach, get your students to prepare PLDs (Personal Learning Dictionaries) of the vocabulary specific to their individual professional or vocational fields. Of course, they will probably not have taken full responsibility for their vocabulary work before, so you will need to use general English vocabulary at first in order to train them. Eventually the PLDs will become so personalised that even when two students share the same specialism, their dictionaries will frequently be quite different. However, as a general rule, each entry into a PLD should include:

- the headword (the English term the student hopes to learn);
- a translation into the student’s L1;
- pronunciation – this can be the official IPA transcription, and/or a personal notation based on listening to the word on a CD-ROM, an online dictionary, to you, etc;
- grammar (especially where this is different to the L1 grammar of the same word);
- an example of use from an authentic text (and perhaps an example invented by the student);
- an explanation of meaning written by the student, plus, if the student chooses, an explanation from a technical dictionary, or from Wikipedia.

It is useful to collect the PLDs from time to time to check that the students are maintaining them properly. If a student’s explanation of the meaning of a term is not clear to you, get them to re-write it, or to explain it to you in English until you do understand. This is quite a demanding exercise, but has obvious benefits both for you, as you get to understand technical vocabulary, and for the student, who practises using it.

3 Teach your students sufficient presentation skills for them to be able to prepare and give mini-presentations about terms or concepts from their specialism. These should last about five minutes, and, initially, the use of PowerPoint should be discouraged; learners need to concentrate on the language they need rather than on the ‘fireworks’ of modern digital presentations.

Problem 3: You don’t have a dedicated coursebook for a specialism you have to teach.

There are various ways we can respond to this situation, which is not at all uncommon. Three simple but effective responses are:

1 Shared reading comprehension. Get your students to bring in authentic texts and/or to search for texts on the internet. Ask them to read their texts and to prepare questions (and answers!) on the content of the texts. Support them as they prepare the questions, primarily with language, but also by reminding them of the types of reading comprehension question that they might like to use. Prepare copies of the texts and the answer sheets, or put them on the institution’s website. Students then choose texts and questions written by their peers and work on them. Where an author and user disagree about the answers, you can join them and ask each one to justify their opinion in English.

2 Jigsaw reading. Get your students to look for texts on the internet that they can download as Word files. Ask them to reformat their texts so that there are clear spaces of approximately 5–6 blank lines between the paragraphs. Make copies of these reformatted texts, keeping a copy of the original text as the answer sheet. Cut the copies up so that your students then receive a ‘jigsaw’

version of the text, with each paragraph on a separate slip of paper.

Invite your students to read the paragraphs and put them back in the right order. This can be done individually, in pairs or threes. On confirming the answer to the order of the paragraphs from the answer sheet, take the opportunity to point out how cohesion is maintained in the text through the use of reference, ellipsis, conjunction, etc.

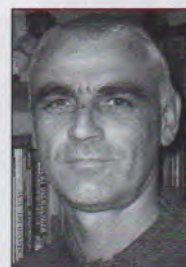
3 Cloze. Get your students to look for texts on the internet that they can download as Word files, and then delete every ninth or tenth word (less often, if you have weaker students). Print out and copy the texts and give them to the students to complete.

A variation on deleting every nth word, is to delete certain grammatical elements (articles, prepositions, pronouns, etc) or to delete vocabulary central to the specialism the text belongs to. You can also vary the difficulty of this ‘cloze’ activity by:

- giving all the missing words in alphabetical order in a box below the text;
- giving all the missing words and one or two ‘distractors’ (ideally, the right word but the wrong part of speech, eg *patient*, *patiently* and *patience*, where only *patience* is correct).



In short, whilst in no way underestimating the magnitude of the task of preparing a course in a specialist English, we should not forget the skills and professional expertise that we possess as language teachers, and which we too easily take for granted in a world that still has not understood just how vital the English teaching professional is to modern life. **ETP**



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