

Bridging the gap between English for Academic and Occupational Purposes

Guadalupe Acedo Dominguez and Patricia Edwards Rokowski, Universidad de Extremadura, Spain

ABSTRACT

The departure point of this paper is characterized by the theoretical principles of what language scholars and authors refer to as English for Specific Purposes (ESP).

The reason for its increasing relevance is due to the fact that English has become a necessary tool in order to obtain a job, get promoted, and perform effectively in the working world. This chain of events has logically brought about as a consequence, the upsurge of an offshoot in the linguistic field, that is, English for Occupational Purposes (EOP).

The main aim of EOP lies in the justification and reinforcement regarding the important role played by the English language in the labour world. Through a needs analysis, carried out within the business world itself, we are able to examine the lacks, sometimes involuntarily unresolved, in the current educational system.

EOP encompasses a reaction against the conventional humanistic approach wherein both teachers and students abide by the holistic objective of knowing all there is to know about the language being studied, rather than concentrating efforts on those skills, which prove to be more relevant within the workplace.

University students of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) need to be capable of establishing successful communication, but not necessarily as precisely as a native speaker, and the same occurs to company employees on the job.

The case study, carried out within a well-known multinational, may provide guidelines to follow when identifying our students' and/or future workers' linguistic and communicative needs, as it consists of empirical research on the analytical process of what has come to be termed as the 'linguistic audit'.

The 'linguistic audit', a term coined by Pilbeam (1979), is a linguistic study whose main objective resides in identifying those strong and weak points of a company's organisation, in terms of the communication process carried out in a foreign language.

Consequently, what prevails in this research is the analysis of those contributions made by a linguistic

audit as pedagogic tool used to fulfil those needs existing in the market as far as EOP is concerned. In this way, EAP methodology takes on true face validity when applied for use at university levels in non-linguistic study programs.

SITUATIONAL CONTEXT

Nowadays, English is necessary to obtain a job, get promoted and perform effectively in the world of work. This demand has generated the incursion of a new linguistic branch within the field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), namely, English for Occupational Purposes (EOP).

In this article, the main guidelines of our research are presented, their purpose being to justify and reinforce the important role played by English within the labour market. In addition, the use of needs analysis in the working world has manifested the sometimes-unresolved lacks existing in the current educational system.

The teaching of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) falls within the framework of what is generally called English for Specific Purposes (ESP), taking place in essence, and as its name suggests, in an educational environment. The reasons for its increasing relevance is due to the fact that English has changed from simply being another foreign language into having become a universal form of communication in all walks of life.

Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998:95) state that the teaching process of any kind of language for occupational purposes should take as a starting point the analysis of the four traditional skills within an appropriate context, that being, as far as possible, the conditions given in the workplace. Moreover, they subscribe to the idea that an effective syllabus must attempt to overcome the deficiencies of the educational system under which they are operating.

EOP therefore encircles a reaction against the conventional humanistic approach wherein both teachers and students abide by the academic objective of knowing everything about the language being studied instead of concentrating attention on those skills most relevant within the workplace in the time allotted in the educational environment.

Nevertheless, perhaps the most important argument regarding selective learning is that adults need to obtain information they can apply outside the academic world. The use of authentic material can make the connection between both worlds possible, the academic and the professional, in a practical way.

This theory is supported by Ellis and Johnson (1996:157) who contend that, when keeping in mind the purpose of teaching EOP, the use of authentic material is essential. They purpose that the most useful material is that which is created by the companies themselves as it is specifically designed for its employees, or potential customers.

However, David Taylor (1994:6) begs to differ, maintaining that the language created within the academic context is already real in itself because students give authenticity to the material used.

Thus, the dichotomy arises on many occasions in which the result is often the opposite of what was originally predicted. In other words, we establish the hypothesis that students eventually learn artificial grammar constructions that they will hardly ever use when immersed in real situations.

University students of English for Academic Purposes need to be capable of establishing and maintaining successful communication, but not necessarily as precisely as a native speaker does. The same occurs to company employees, whose language competence may contain errors that do not impede understanding or cause communicative breakdowns to be effective.

Needs analysis in the workplace entails, according to Dudley-Evans y St. John (1998:60), some guidelines to be followed in order to cover the aforementioned circumstances.

1. Knowledge, on the part of employees, of the communicative function of EOP.
2. Understanding, on behalf on employers, of the expectations of those who need English in order to carry out a job.
3. Knowledge, on the part of the employees, of the theory and practice of EOP.

Furthermore, EOP envelops openness to the idea that cross-cultural differences do widely affect the teaching-learning process. Sensitivity towards these differences should be developed to make communicative competence as effectively as possible.

We observe that some deficiencies exist within the academic system when the textbooks presently used were analysed. Many books, for example, include fixed expressions too artificial to be representative of a cultural reality.

PROPOSALS

In order for the teaching of EOP to cover the requirements of the present day society demanding its service, future professionals must be prepared to use English in the workplace adequately.

On the same token, a proper syllabus, which is balanced and successful, needs to pay more attention to oral/aural skills, that is, to oral statement and listening comprehension. Such a problem was quite frequent in the past, and is still present nowadays, due to the abyss existing between the goals of the academic and the professional world. Unfortunately, traditional language classrooms do not particularly lend themselves to fluent and flexible communication between teachers and students and, consequently, those situations taking place within them cannot be considered comparable to the real world.

The classroom and the outside world are all too often considered two exclusive and excluding entities, each operating of its own accord. However, in an attempt to avoid this division, the design of the EOP syllabus can contemplate the classroom as a physical place and an integral part of the real world, only differing from the latter in a series of conventions, interrelations and strategies.

Therefore, in order to reach satisfactory objectives, a great deal of the time spent on applying and acquiring theoretical academic knowledge should be devoted to working with linguistic elements taken directly from a real world context.

METHODOLOGY

The case study we develop herein was carried out within a well-known multinational. Our proposal suggests it be used as a guideline to follow when identifying students' and/or future workers' linguistic and communicative needs, as it consists of empirical research of the analytical process known as the 'linguistic audit'.

The 'linguistic audit', a term coined by Pilbeam (1979), is a linguistic study whose main objective is to identify those strong and weak points of a company's organization, in terms of the communication process carried out in a foreign language. Pilbeam suggests that needs analysis must be centred on those immediate activities the employee has to carry out and on the employee's personal features. The objective of this model is to accurately identify the communicative competence of the professional when working, in the English language, on the project he/she has been assigned to. In this way, the company will be able to develop those cognitive skills that need further and more efficient expertise.

The principal aim of researching the communicative needs within the workplace is to analyse the identification of weak points and linguistic problems which need to be solved both in the long run and

on a short-term basis. Moreover, the resulting outcome will provide some possible solutions in order to improve the staff performance.

Several different steps are envisaged in a linguistic audit, which is carried out either periodically, or each time employees are involved in a new project.

1. Needs analysis within the work place is designed. At this stage, intended objectives are proposed.
 2. The specific language problems of employees are identified, those at the present moment, those at the time of carrying out a project, and those with regard to future occasions.
 3. In the third phase, the necessary resources of the company are exploited, and a certain role is assigned to each employee. In other words, the company's main elements and resources are analysed and identified.
 4. And 5) In these phases, the real use employees make of English is analysed, and efforts are made to improve their future communicative competence. It is at this very moment when needs analysis is carried out in order to exploit and develop individual communicative skills.
1. In this last stage, results are analysed and a series of impartial recommendations are given to the staff in order to improve their consequent performance levels.

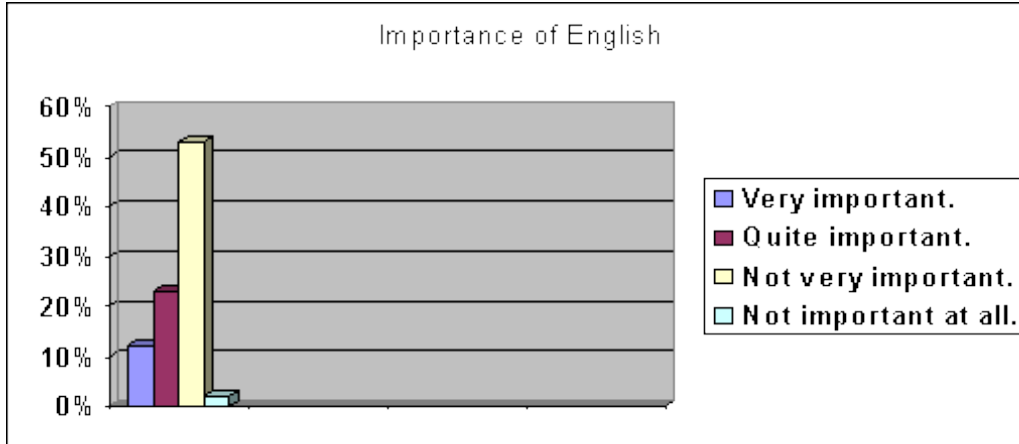
As a result, the process followed in the linguistic audit aids the company in taking measures, through a series of strategic decisions, in order to modify and eventually improve those deficiencies encountered in the language communication of their employees on the job. This model assures higher professional performance, which in turn provides the company with higher yields through effective language use.

ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS OBTAINED

In order to have an approximate idea of the actual situation of the English language in the workplace nowadays, a questionnaire was elaborated and sent to workers in different companies.

The said questionnaire contains ten questions related to the use of English within the work place and analyses the use those polled make of the traditional four skills. The analysis of the obtained data, taking three hundred tests as a sampling, shows significant results as far as the use of English is concerned. The descriptive features of those polled are approximately 40% women between 27-33 years old. The majority of those polled studied Economics and Business Administration, and a lower percentage belongs to the field of Industrial Engineering.

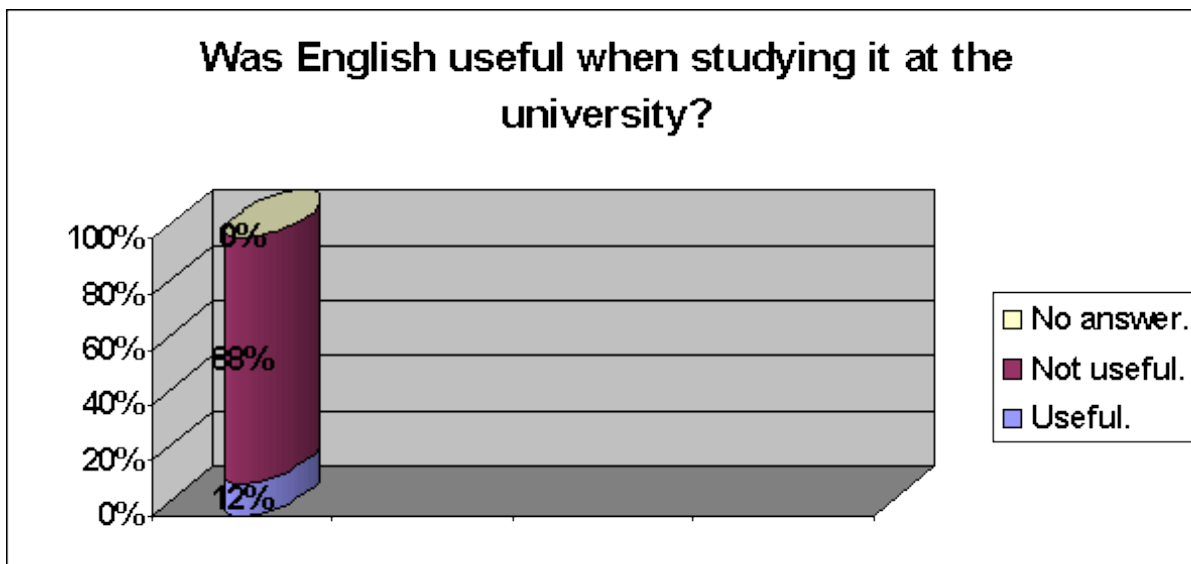
Keeping in mind that our probe is undertaken with professionals in non-linguistic careers, we posed the following question: 'Do you think English is important during university study?' As a result, the majority of those polled thought that this language was not given the importance it deserved, while only the remaining 12% think that English was considered to be very important. This last percentage, although a minor one and thus insignificant, is nevertheless surprising as the vast majority of technical degrees already possess and academic syllabus in which English for Specific Purposes is offered, if even with an optional status. Regarding the aforementioned majority, those who think English deserves more attention, this reinforces the hypothesis supported by ESP teachers who continue to demand a more frequent presence of a foreign language when students are at the university.



1. Importance of English

Another aspect, which strongly draws our attention, is that 88% of those polled feel that, while studying at the university, they did not learn English in a way, which helped them to make use of it in a future post. These results reinforce our thesis that English should be given the significance it deserves, especially if we take into account that we are integrated in a multilingual society (i.e. The European Union) where speaking at least one foreign language, preferably two, is considered the required norm.

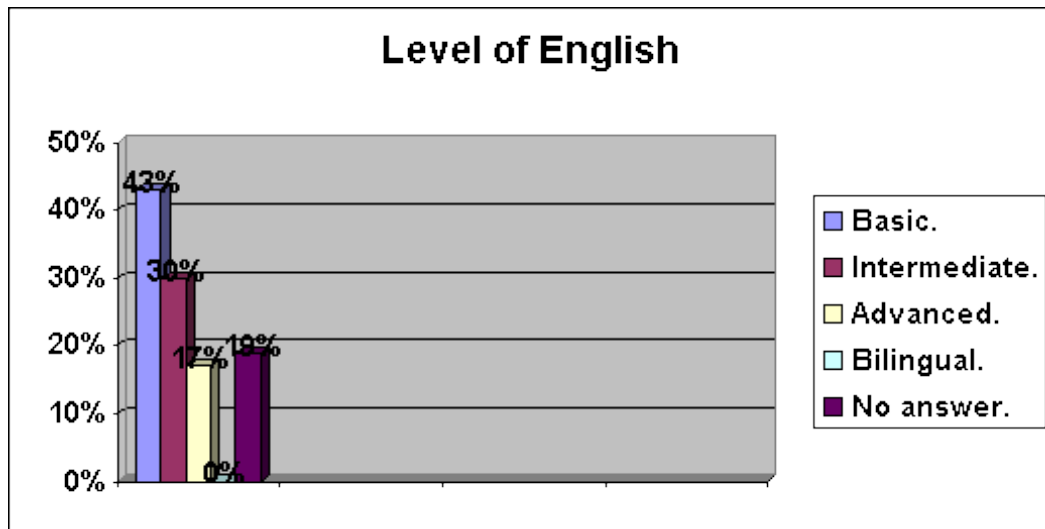
Nevertheless, it is equally true that overcrowding in universities makes it more difficult to give oral/aural communication the place it should occupy within the teaching-learning process.



Graph 2. Was English useful when studying it at the university?

When analysing the answers given to the following question, in which we asked students to evaluate their knowledge of English, we can see that, even though they are frequently in touch with the language, only 17% of those polled think they have a high level of English. 30% say their level is an intermediate one, and the remaining 43% admit to have only acquired a basic working knowledge. The graph we enclose throws some light on our research findings.

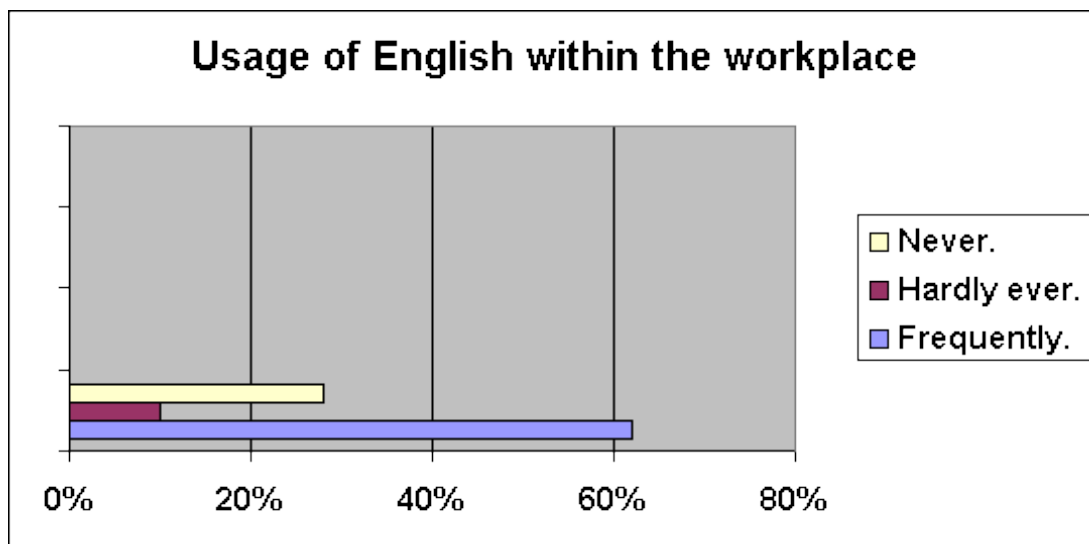
From these results, we deduce that there are still many deficiencies that cannot be solved until some improvements, beyond the direct control of teachers, are introduced within the academic system. However, in order to achieve this purpose, authorities have to take all these circumstances into account.



Graph 3. Level of English

The following question is related to the use employees make of oral skills within the workplace and it was posed to obtain more details about the real application of EOP. However, we faced a great deal of difficulties along the way on the part of those polled who were very reticent at the time of giving details about the activities they carry out each working day.

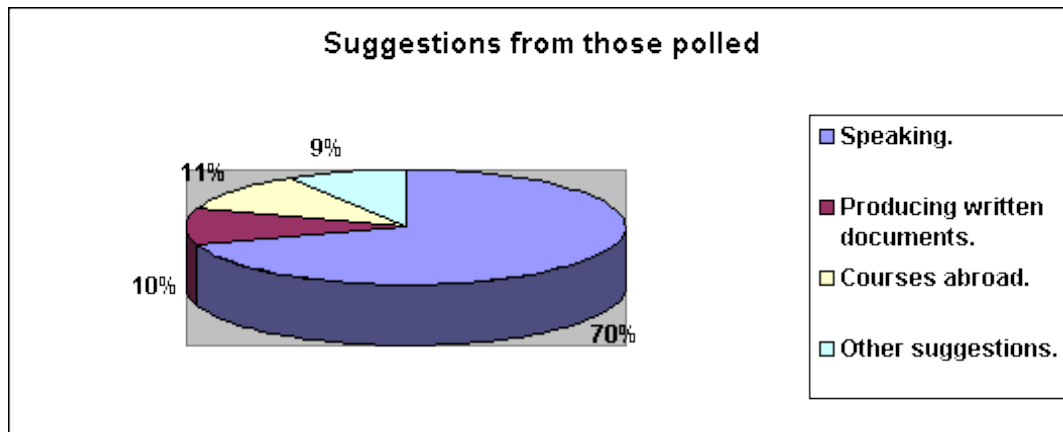
On the one hand, a representative 62% affirm that they frequently speak in English when they are working while on the other hand, only 10% use it very occasionally. The remaining 28% need to improve their communicative competence in the language before attempting to use it. If we take into account that most of them are supposed to use the English language every single working day, we can affirm that further linguistic training is necessary within the workplace.



Graph 4. Usage of English within the workplace.

Finally, we posed the last question, ‘What do you think is important to have a good knowledge of English for Occupational Purposes?’ It is significant, although not surprising, to verify that 70% of those polled suggested again oral communication as the backbone of the process. In contrast, 11% suggested attending courses abroad, which in a way, are also an effective method of acquiring a higher level of linguistic, cultural and communicative competence. In the following graph, we can observe in more detail those aspects employees consider essential when learning a foreign language.

As far as the section dealing with other comments is concerned, a reduced number of the people polled contributed with suggestions such as the relationship established with foreign employees (native and non native English-speaking personnel) so that they can converse with them. In addition, different options were offered in suggested activities such as talks, speeches or movies in English, that is, activities where the main aim is to be able to manage in situations similar to those occurring in the workplace.



Graph 5. Suggestions from those polled.

Having analysed at this point the data obtained, we present in the following section the most important conclusions we have come to.

CONCLUSIONS

From the previous results, we deduce that students who are technically ready for work after finishing their university studies, are not so prepared to apply their knowledge of English to a labour context, evidently more specific, and for this reason, we sustain that such a situation should be avoided as far as possible.

It stands to reason that a syllabus has to take into account extra linguistic elements, that is to say, cross-cultural differences so that the objectives established can be reached. The obvious justification for this is mainly because cross-cultural variables do affect customer and employees' relationships. As a consequence, we have to prepare our students not only to be able to communicate in a foreign language, but also to be capable of international communication, without having to face the problem of textual and contextual ambiguities.

First of all, we subscribe to the opinion that if the knowledge acquired during the academic period were always appropriate, companies would not need to evaluate their employees' linguistic competence. We defend the idea of developing a practical and useful way of teaching ESP that keeps preparation for the world of work in focus.

Secondly, and as we have previously said, we firmly believe in the integration of cultural competence as one more element within the teaching-learning process.

Thirdly, the priority of oral statement and aural comprehension is once again evident, not only when holding a post, but even before getting the job, that is, during the interviews used as means of selection. In other words, inefficient language skills may prove to be eliminatory for an unprepared potential candidate. In this sense, true communicative competence makes future job seekers more marketable.

Finally, it is also important to take into account the inclusion of new technologies in the teaching process through the use of the English language in faxes, e-mail and on the Internet in order to be part of a technologically and culturally advanced society.

All in all, the linguistic audit demonstrates a clear case regarding some deficiencies that must be corrected at university in technical degree programs in order for students to have access to meaningful language preparation and training for their future professions. In conclusion, it seems logical to assume that English for Academic Purposes and English for Occupational Purposes share overlapping goals, in which the former, undertaken at university, lays the groundwork for the latter, in the practical application of acquired language skills.

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