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## “Teacher English”: Teacher’s Target Language Use as Cornerstone of Successful Language Teaching

### Summary

In most of today’s courses of English as a foreign language, the learners and teacher share the same mother tongue, but English is the language used to carry out all activities as far as the learner level allows. This means that the teacher’s level of target language mastery plays a significant role in the quality of language teaching and the resulting learning. The paper looks at the functions of teacher talk as a source of input and model language use as well as a tool for managing classroom processes. Based on that, an argument is made for ‘teacher English’ as a case of English for specific purposes.

**Key words:** target language use, teacher talk, English for specific purposes, language input, classroom management

## Učiteljska angleščina: učiteljeva raba ciljnega jezika kot temelj uspešnega jezikovnega poučevanja

### Povzetek

Večidel pouka angleščine kot tujega jezika v današnjem svetu poteka v okoljih, kjer učitelj in učenci delijo isti materni jezik, vendar pa je angleščina tisti jezik, v katerem se izvajajo vse učne aktivnosti, kolikor to le dopušča nivo znanja učencev. To pomeni, da učiteljevo znanje in raba ciljnega jezika vpliva na kakovost jezikovnega poučevanja in učenja. Prispevek podaja pregled funkcij učiteljevega govora kot vira jezikovnega vnosa in vzora jezikovne rabe kot tudi orodja za vodenje učnih procesov. Na tej osnovi je podana trditev, da je ‘učiteljeva angleščina’ primer angleščine za posebne potrebe.

**Ključne besede:** raba ciljnega jezika, učiteljev govor, angleščina za posebne potrebe, jezikovni vnos, vodenje pouka

# “Teacher English”: Teacher’s Target Language Use as Cornerstone of Successful Language Teaching

## 1. Introduction

In order to teach a certain subject, mastery of that subject is the key requirement. That is common sense and hardly needs to be proven by research (e.g. Hustler and McIntyre 1996). One cannot be, for example, a maths teacher without being competent in mathematics. But, what exactly does being competent in mathematics entail? For people not involved in educational systems this may seem a redundant question. However, from the point of view of describing teacher competences, a general idea is not a sufficient basis for planning, executing and developing teacher training programs, nor for the management of teacher employment and evaluation of practicing teachers’ work, all of which should be aimed at increasing the quality of language learning in the schools.

Of course, any attempt to define teacher competences, whether across subject areas or for a specific subject, has to take into consideration that in the actual teaching process, a teacher’s subject knowledge interplays in intricate ways with his/her pedagogical / instructional competences and personality (Tsui 2003). Within this context, however, an analysis of subject area competences brings to the surface subject-specific issues. In the case of foreign languages (in our case, English), we could ask whether subject area competence means being able to describe the system and structures of the language, or understanding the principles of the language as a social tool, or understanding of the language processing in the brain, or the ability to use the language, or all of those, and in what proportions.

Obviously, these are very complex questions, so let us focus on just the last of the enumerated aspects of an English teacher’s knowledge of English - practical competence in language use, or language proficiency. What is the minimum threshold of target language proficiency that ensures quality teaching at different levels in different contexts? The higher, the better? Is it enough to equip teacher trainees with a high proficiency in general English, or do they need to develop certain specific language uses, skills and strategies?

These questions rest on the assumption that English as the target language, and not the native language the teacher and students often share, is indeed predominantly the language of classroom discourse in most EFL classrooms. Franklin (1990) lists a number of authors who provide theoretical arguments for this. In fact, there has been a strong movement in the 20th century to teach foreign languages exclusively through the target language, but this has widely been found too extreme by both theoreticians and teachers. However, as Atkinson points out (1993, 4), “failure to engender enough use of the target language in the classroom is one of the major methodological reasons for poor achievement levels in language learning.” The currently widely professed and practiced communicative approach to foreign language teaching assumes that while the mother tongue has

a meaningful role to play, using English as much as possible in the classroom is one of the main factors in developing a learner's communicative language competence. While theories diverge on the issue of how important it is for learners to have an opportunity to interact (form output) rather than just listen to the target language, there is general agreement in the EFL field that exchange of authentic messages is one of the most important aspects of successful communicative language learning. Clark (cited in Franklin 1990) similarly points out that in order to develop communicative competence, TL rather than the mother tongue has to be used extensively in classroom communication, as it is only that way that students will perceive the language as a real communicative tool rather than just a subject to be studied.

## 2. Description of the English used by EFL teachers

In an attempt to describe the teacher's use of TL in the classroom, we have to start from the 'why' before we can answer the 'how'. The teacher's classroom talk in English mainly fulfils two types of functions: it provides language input / a model of target language use, and is a tool for managing classroom processes. As regards teacher talk as input, students are nowadays of course heavily exposed to English through the media, travel and other out-of-school sources as well, but as research done into classroom interaction (e. g. Long 1983) suggests, teacher talk can and should be more structured and fine-tuned to students' learning needs than random input they get outside the classroom, and therefore out-of-class exposure does not diminish the value of classroom input. As Stephen Krashen pointed out in 1982, the foreign language classroom is not a substitute for the real world, but should bring students to a point where they can better learn from it.

There are also functions of teacher talk that are not subject-specific. In any subject, the teacher has to demonstrate mastery of the subject as an aspect of his/her authority (related to his/her professional self-confidence), which has many implications in the teaching/learning process. At the same time, a teacher in any subject uses language as the primary tool of classroom management; to organize daily classroom activities, explain, give feedback, discipline, motivate, encourage, correct etc. It is in carrying out these specific communicative tasks that language teachers have the opportunity to provide error-free, meaningful, structured and fine-tuned input in the target language.

What configuration of language competence and what level of proficiency in the target language are required for that? There are as yet few studies available which would detail the teachers' target language needs from this perspective. A set of requirements such as provided by Kreeft Peyton for FL teachers in the USA (cited in Philips 1991) is much too general: "A high level of language proficiency in all of the modalities of the target language – speaking, listening, reading, and writing, the ability to use the language in real-life contexts, for both social and professional purposes, and the ability to comprehend contemporary media in the foreign language, both oral and written, and interact successfully with native speakers in the United States and abroad." There have been several calls in the literature to define "the components of language proficiency most crucial for language teachers" (Richards 1998, 7).

Atkinson says that “teachers should be encouraged to acquire a sound knowledge of the highly specific target language items related to the minutiae of (communicative) language teaching” (1993, 4). Some authors even make a straightforward claim that English for the teacher is a case of LSP (Language for Specific Purposes) (Richards 1998, Bondi).

### 3. English for specific purposes

To prove or disprove this idea, we must examine the notion of ESP (or LSP). ESP has always been defined more in terms of an approach to language teaching than language per se. The most widely cited definition of ESP was given in 1988 by Peter Strevens, who proposed four absolute and two variable characteristics of ESP. These were later revised by Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998), so that now the absolute characteristics of an ESP course are considered to be the following:

- it is designed to meet specific needs of the learner;
- it makes use of the underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves;
- it is centered on the language (grammar, lexis, register), skills, discourse and genres appropriate to these activities.

Since this paper does not look at the methodology of teaching ESP, let us focus only on what ESP means in terms of content (a model of language description) or aims. What is meant in the above definition by 'specific needs' and 'activities of the discipline it serves'? Munby (1978) and Mackay and Mountford (1978) claimed that the word 'specific' refers to the purposes for which learners learn a language, not the nature of the language they learn (specific jargon or registers). Many later authors agree that 'needs' is equal to 'communicative purposes' or 'communicative tasks'. It could be noted, however, that it is always the purpose of a communication act that defines the language used to fulfil it, and it is therefore impossible to disassociate specific purposes from specific language items and processes used to fulfil them.

In 1978, John Munby made a formidable attempt to provide a system for defining both in his 'Communicative Syllabus Design' for ESP language programmes. Although his model was not widely used in practice, and attracted much criticism due to its atomistic approach, which reduced to a linear order the extremely complex and inherently organic process of verbal communication, Munby nevertheless provided a scientific basis for a modern definition of ESP.

Widdowson in his 1983 'Language Purpose and Language Use' criticized Munby and defined ESP in contrast to EGP (General English). He explained that while EGP develops a general capacity for language use, which the learner could apply in different situations, ESP is a restricted language competence, which enables one to cope only with a clearly defined set of language tasks. While Widdowson disagrees with the labelling of different ESP courses 'English for Waiters,' 'English for Lawyers' etc., he considers it evident that different areas of human activity involve different language tasks, and that to cope with them, we employ different sets of language items and skills.

As far as the contrast between LSP and general language goes, DeBeaugrande (1989, cited in Robinson 1991, 6) says that “[...] no LSP is composed of its own resources. Instead, every LSP overlaps heavily with at least one language for general purposes and is free to use any part of the latter without expressing justification. One could not, for example, state the 'rules' which determine which parts of the grammar or lexicon of English may or may not appear in 'scientific English'.” This suggests, as is confirmed by other authors (Gačić 1985, Roelcke 1999), that LSP is different from general language primarily in the distribution / dominance of certain language means. Roelcke (1999) also points out that each type of LSP is not just a subsystem or variety of general language but is also defined against other types of LSP pertaining to other professions / activities.

Several other authors have tried to define ESP in terms of pure linguistic description. According to Hoffman (1988), ESP is all the language means used to communicate in a limited field by people who are experts or active in this field. Under language means Hoffman understands prosodic and lexicogrammatical means in functional interplay in all the communicative acts possible within the specific area.

It seems that from the definitions of ESP by a number of authors we can extract two main points:

1. ESP is restricted to a group of users involved in the same profession, scientific discipline, educational or leisure activity as distinct from other groups. It is the language used by members of a group to carry out the activities and talk about the concepts, many of which, but not all, are specific to the group.
2. ESP is language that is used to fulfil a specified communicative purpose. In this sense, the English you need to buy a postcard is equally specific as the English a physician needs to understand a scientific article. From this follows that an ESP description is always based on a specification of communicative situation, act, task or purpose. Secondary to this is a specification of language items and processes required by the specified communicative situations. These may be largely absent from or used differently in general language.

In the 1980s and later, numerous ESP courses were developed for a wide range of scientific disciplines and professions. It should not be surprising that their content and aims specifications were largely functional/notional or situational/generic. Within this, there are almost always itemized descriptions of lexis specific to an area of knowledge or activity, use of grammatical patterns that 'deviates' from general English, and restrictions or selective focus in terms of language skills, subskills and strategies taught. In a theoretical sense, the inclusion of all of these in defining an area of ESP can be traced back at least as far as the work of John Munby. Today, a comparably comprehensive, but less atomistic and much more flexible model of specifying language use is provided in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe 2001).



## 4. English for EFL teachers as a case of ESP

How do all of the discussed characteristics of ESP relate to the English used / needed by teachers of English as a foreign language? Firstly, at the risk of stating the obvious, teachers of English as a foreign language are definitely a group of users of English sharing a profession that is distinct from other professions. All of them use English on a daily basis to carry out activities typical of their profession. It is true that to some extent these (communicative) activities overlap with the activities of teachers of English as a mother tongue, teachers of other subjects, and parents teaching their children to speak, but there are also ways in which TEFL is different from all of these. As opposed to learning a mother tongue in a home environment, the foreign language classroom for example almost entirely lacks contextual clues, while on the other hand students already possess competence in one language. As opposed to school classes of English as a mother tongue, or subjects like mathematics or history, foreign language classrooms are specific because in them the “language is both the vehicle and the object of instruction” (Long 1983, 9). In addition to clearly defined communicative tasks TEFL shares with these other fields of activity, the differences give rise to tasks which are typical only of TEFL and largely absent from or handled differently in other contexts.

The communicative tasks typically carried out by teachers of English as a foreign language have been identified by several authors of handbooks for teachers which fairly closely follow the patterns of similar textbooks / handbooks for various other professions (English for nurses, English for customs officers etc.). Spratt (1994), Heaton (1981), Hughes (1981) and Willis (1981) all take the functional/notional approach to describing the EFL teacher's use language in the classroom. Jane Willis for example deals with how the teacher uses English to control and discipline a class, how to introduce a reading passage, how to divide the class in pairs for dialogue practice etc. While of course there are several linguistic realizations of each of these functions, teachers widely tend to use the same phrases and sentences for a certain function. Some of these structures are of course used in general English (situations other than the EFL classroom) as well. For example, 'Listen carefully' is a perfectly everyday phrase, the only thing that is specific about it in terms of teacher English is that it may have a much higher frequency. On the other hand, there are phrases used in an English classroom that would hardly be used anywhere outside of it, for example 'When we've finished this exercise, we're going to practice asking questions' or 'Would you turn around to make a group of four, please?'

Many theorists and teachers of ESP have focused on lexis as the main defining characteristic of ESP as opposed to general English, perhaps because it is the most obvious one. English as used by teachers of EFL is a bit problematic in this sense because by its very nature (which is talking in English to people whose English might be quite limited) it does not contain much lexis which would be incomprehensible to people outside the profession. Perhaps the word 'transparency' is not a household word, but there are few others to suggest a typical ESP such as found in 'English for biologists' or 'English for stockbrokers'.

'Teacher English' might not be a stereotypical ESP; it is indeed specific in terms of communicative functions and frequency of more or less specific phrases / grammatical structures, but does not really have a stock of highly specific lexis. There is, however, further specificity to be found beyond the level of language functions and lexicogrammatical items. There are uses of prosody that are distinct from those in other contexts (for example, use of intonation, pauses and stress for the purposes of presentation and elicitation). Also, in terms of language skills, even in the broad sense, the language teaching profession has needs which are not the same as in other contexts of language use. In particular, for a teacher's daily classroom needs, competence in speaking is obviously by far the most important as compared to the competence in listening, reading and writing. So, while some groups of users of English as a foreign language might need a competence in producing even quite complex types of written discourse in English (such as contracts or scientific papers), the EFL teacher, particularly at the primary level, might have hardly any need for a competence in composing written text in English, as suggested by the creators of the European Language Profile for FL primary teachers (Bondi 2002).

Further special demands become apparent if we explore the area of language subskills and strategies. As an example let us look at one of the most important aspects of an EFL teacher's target language competence – the ability to adapt the level of their language output to the abilities and learning needs of the students. This often means a high degree of selection and reduction in grammar and vocabulary to ensure comprehension, while at the same time input needs to be rich and varied. Through this, the teacher can expose learners, at the right moment, to language which is slightly above their level of mastery but provided in a sufficiently appropriate context so that they can infer the meaning and integrate the new item. While adapting output to the communicative partner's abilities in order to ensure mutual comprehension is a general language strategy, it is more crucial, complex and demanding in foreign language instruction settings.

## 5. Conclusion

Beyond the previously mentioned classroom language handbooks, there is unfortunately very little research-based literature to date that deals with 'teacher English', particularly from an ESP point of view. However, considering the fact that the teacher's use of English is the key aspect of EFL classrooms, EFL teacher training programmes "(both pre- and in-service) should give much more weight to the importance of teacher talk and its link to language acquisition" (Walsh 2003). Richards writes that "presumably one needs to attain a certain threshold level of proficiency in a language to be able to teach effectively in it ..." (1998, 7). This idea seems worryingly vague and tentative from the point of view of designing EFL teacher training programs and ensuring proper standards of teacher performance in schools. This paper proposes that 'teacher English', although perhaps in less obvious ways, is just as much of a language for specific purposes as any other that has been labelled as such for decades. As such, it deserves and calls for more 'ESP treatment', which primarily means a detailed analysis of the teachers'

communicative language needs. Only this kind of an analysis can be a solid basis for equipping teachers with an efficiently profiled target language mastery to ensure quality teaching for quality learning in a world which demands constantly that more people be constantly more proficient in the English language.

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