

A Collaborative Perspective for Autonomy in Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

This chapter examines how autonomy as a teaching-learning concept can prevail in a predominantly teacher-centered learning environment at the tertiary level. To do so, a comprehensive collaborative paradigm is used to highlight the inter-relationships between the players, the language and the subject in an EAP context. This will demonstrate how instructors and learners can explore autonomy first separately then together.

The observations and experiences gathered over a two-year period in a tertiary institution in Malaysia provide the body of data on which this chapter is based. The findings suggest that autonomy, in particular learner autonomy, cannot be “taught.” It needs to be developed by the teacher suppressing the desire to lead, and overcoming her phobia of uncertainty. Additionally, the language teacher must be prepared to collaborate with the subject lecturer to authenticate the learning goals.

Biodata

Ng Kwai Kuen was an associate professor in the English Language Department of the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics at the University of Malaya. She had taught for many years both specialist courses and ESP courses. Currently, she is teaching in Taylor College. Her principal research interest addresses language teachers’ perceptions of their role in authentic subject teaching and learning. She is an advocate of the need for a learner-centered approach.

Autonomous Learning and English for Specific Purpose

Autonomy as used in this chapter supports the view that ‘(it) ... is not something achieved by the handing over of power or rational reflection. ... It is the struggle to become author of one’s own world, to be able to create one’s own meaning.’ (Pennycook, 1997:39). As such, autonomy cannot be bestowed as a gift as Freire (1970) puts it. It has been pointed out that versions of autonomy still tend to deal with questions of power from a position of control and that autonomous learning in practice is often reduced to a set of skills. (Esch, 1997). The challenge of autonomous learning and teaching has been likened to ‘shooting arrows at the sun’ by Breen and Mann (1997) .

These views suggest that learning and teaching the autonomous way poses tremendous challenges for both learners and practitioners. Second language learners of English possess relatively limited control over the language. In this sense, they are not independent of external support, for example, teacher input. Consequently what the teachers do and how they conduct their classes would necessarily impact on the prospect and practice of autonomous learning.

As the issues and aspects of autonomous learning and teaching are wide and complex, this chapter will focus on one particular aspect, namely, how language teachers in an English for Specific Purpose (ESP) situation respond to the challenges of learner needs and autonomy. It has been pointed out that language learning cannot be isolated from the particular contexts (Pennycook, 1997). This is especially true of ESP courses.

In the ensuing discussion, the ‘struggle to become author of one’s own world’ in relation to English language teachers will emerge. It is suggested that this would provide insights into how autonomous learning may be encouraged or undermined.

The Study

The issue of autonomy has been explored in a study of ESP teaching with particular reference to architectural studies at the tertiary level. It examines and appraises the role and requirement of the language teacher as a facilitator of academic studies. The study focuses on how language teachers from a Malaysian university deal with the specialist reading materials in Architectural History

and Theory. The decision to focus on the teaching of ESP reading is based on the observation that reading of specialist writings constitutes a critical aspect in tertiary studies. As Robinson (1991:102) states,

“(r)eadng is probably the most generally needed skill in EAP (English for Academic Purposes) world-wide. ... for many disciplines, much if not all of the basic material is available in the students’ first language, which is also the medium of instruction. The need for English is limited to the skill of reading...”

Johns and Dudley-Evans’ Model

Johns and Dudley-Evans’ model arose from an experimental attempt that describes the interactive relationship involving the students, language teacher and subject lecturer. (see below) It was a collaborative model for ESP introduced in 1980. This model can be refined to make it relevant to the Malaysian experience. Implicit in this pioneering team-teaching model is the capability of the language teacher to partake in the collaborative venture. Similarly, the subject lecturer is expected to be completely involved. Such assumptions do not accord with practice and experience in Malaysia.

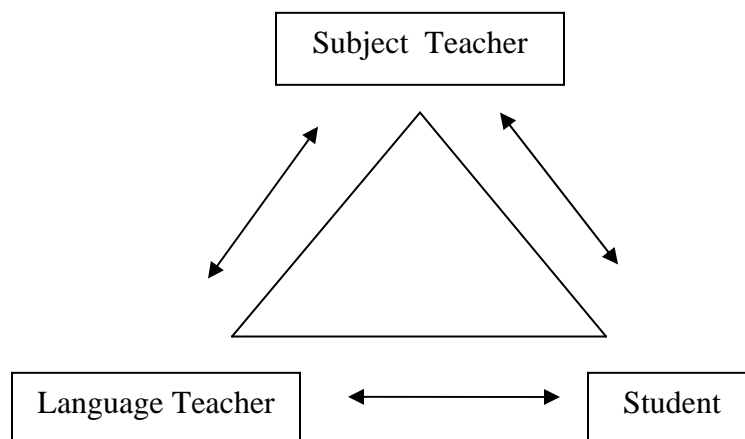


Fig. 1 - Johns & Dudley-Evans model

The ESP Collaborative Model - Rationale

The ESP Collaborative model (Ng, 1999) is an extension of the Johns and Dudley-Evans tripartite relationship. A major consideration for the proposed ESP Collaborative model is that models like Johns and Dudley-Evans' espousing collaboration concepts ought to be viewed in the real context of ESL teaching in tertiary institutions in non-native English speaking settings. This must involve more inter-related models of the subject and language specialists, the subject and language, the administration, and resources and policy. Some of these relationships have probably not been described in theoretical terms as such, but they all affect the practice of ESP. The proposed ESP Collaborative model does not claim to have identified all the links, or to be exhaustive. What it attempts to do is reflect more closely the complexity of the real situation.

The language and subject elements have been isolated as independent factors for consideration for collaboration. These two elements interact with the language teacher, subject lecturer and students. It is suggested that this would enable a more careful insight into the assumed relationships in the Johns and Dudley-Evans model, such as the collaboration between subject teacher and language teacher with respect to both the subject and language content. This is likely to explain the reasons for the reservations or "uneasiness" of language teachers, who are thrust into a wide range of ESP teaching situations requiring both autonomous actions and collaborative efforts. By including the two, the feasibility of collaboration between the two groups of teachers in the Malaysian context can be more readily examined.

Johns and Dudley-Evans' model has another implicit component, the resource and support of the teaching institution. The condition for subject and language teachers to interact, and resources available for language teaching are conditioned by policy and practical circumstances of an institution. It is thus pertinent to include this component referred to as Resource in the ESP Collaborative model.

Features of the ESP Collaborative model

The ESP Collaborative model (see Fig. 2 below) may be used as an investigative device to bring into focus the "operational sets" of multiple relationships and their inherent influence on the practice of ESP or integrated subject-language studies. It is believed that this modified model

would be able to provide valuable insight about the constraints and limitations for autonomous and collaborative efforts.

It appears evident in the context of ESP teaching and learning that the relationships between the players and elements involved need not be one of a triangular relationship among the three parties involved as suggested in the Johns & Dudley-Evans model. Such a consideration is especially pertinent in an environment where the conditions for autonomous learning and collaborative teaching have yet to be established and the provision of resource support from the sponsor cannot be automatically assumed.

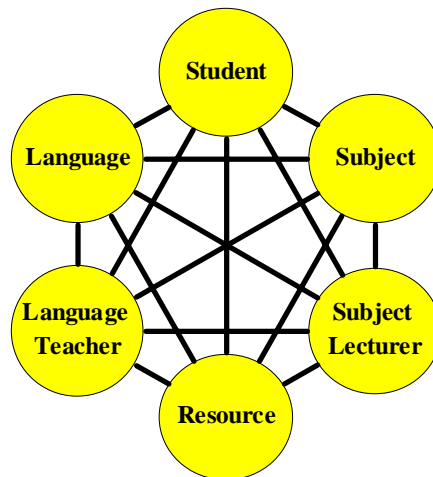


Fig. 2 - The ESP Collaborative model

Contained in the ESP Collaborative model are both the simple bi-polar relationships that have frequently been the focus of previous research, for example, in genre studies. Beyond these are triangular relationships typified by the Johns & Dudley-Evans model. More complex interconnections are also exposed. The bounded area is clearly more important than the individual links that form the boundary.

In an ESP teaching situation it would appear that the language teacher may not be capable of independent action. There is a perception of "parasiticism" on the part of the language teacher (Widdowson 1983; Bhatia 1986; Carreon 1990). This perception may be misleading in the sense that the language teacher is automatically assumed to be in a dependent position. A re-examination of this parasitic relationship between the subject and language teachers is needed for

several reasons. It may be more constructive to use the analogy of a bridge. This would more positively reflect the spirit of collaboration taking place, and promote the same ethos in the classroom setting. The complexities of ESP or integrated subject and language learning, while not fully understood, are being unravelled, as is evident in the progress made in the last 30 years (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Robinson, 1991).

Another consideration that has not been adequately addressed is how this perception affects the implementation of autonomy. Problems confronting students in academic studies often suggest a need for collaboration between the subject and language teachers. However, team-teaching or collaborative efforts between the language and subject teachers reported thus far tend to reinforce the "parasitic" perception of the language teacher's role. The subject lecturer is implicitly assumed to be in control of the teaching and learning situation, vis-à-vis the student and the language teacher. In reality, the teaching and learning situation is less clear-cut than such a one-sided view. Effects of subject and language teaching on student autonomy either have been taken for granted, or have been neglected in most instances. The assumption of the independent subject lecturer and dependent language-teacher relationship needs to be examined more critically.

Application of the ESP Collaborative Model to the Research Data

The ESP Collaborative model is valuable for structuring questions regarding the status and reality of the ESP teaching at the tertiary level. The model serves as a useful tool to suggest relationships between the various players and agents in ESP and how autonomy comes into play.

Description of the various shapes or inter-relationships helps to contextualise the responses of the study data. The model also offers many potential areas of further investigation of an increasingly complex mosaic, to be engineered by many, to give a holistic appreciation of the practice of ESP.

Subsets of the model are useful in delineating the relationships involved in ESP in several ways. First, each subset enables a view of a partial but particular aspect of the whole. Secondly, these shapes and connections are a way of categorising the subjects' responses. Finally, viewing the parts will give insight to the whole and provide a memorable structure.

Though the ESP Collaborative model is capable of generating many connections and inter-relationships, not all of these have relevance or equal importance in the context of this study. Only relationships or shapes relevant to the study data are highlighted.

Subset 1 - The Raison d'être of ESP

This triangular relationship (Figure3) sits at the apex of the collaborative model. ESP is predicated on students' difficulty in coping with the learning of their subject content in a second or foreign language, specifically English. According to Benesch (1996:732), ESP curriculum development is guided by *learner needs*, defined by Johns & Dudley-Evans as the "...identifiable elements of students' target English situations" (1991:299). Brumfit (1977) also points out that, "... an ESP course is directly concerned with the purposes for which the learners need English, purposes that are usually expressed in functional terms..." (cited in Robinson, 1980:11)

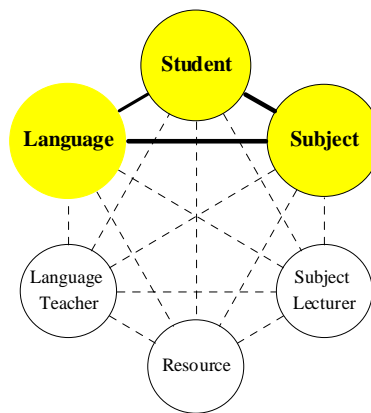


Fig. 3 – The Raison d'être

Subset 2 - The ESP Practitioner Remit

This quadrilateral subset represents the ESP practitioner's teaching remit. In it the language teacher is faced with the challenge of contextualising language learning for the students in a particular discipline. She needs to address the demands arising from the *raison d'être* of ESP.

Much of the information in the data collected and analysis performed in the study revolve around this relationship.

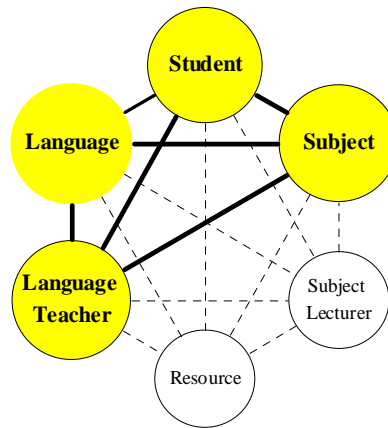


Fig. 4 - The ESP Practitioner Remit

Subset 3 - Private Battle (Fright, Fight or Flight)

Embodied in subset 2 above is this triangular subset (Figure 3), that symbolises the language teacher's "private battle". This tends to trigger off the language teacher's "fright" reaction. As Carreon reports, "In the Philippines, ESP is a controversial issue...muscles tense up at the mention of the term; teachers jump to its defense or attack it strongly, and those hear of it for the first time or know too little of it to form an opinion are often forced to take sides ..." (1988:83) The data collected for the study suggest this set of relationships to be significant in any consideration of autonomy in teaching or learning.

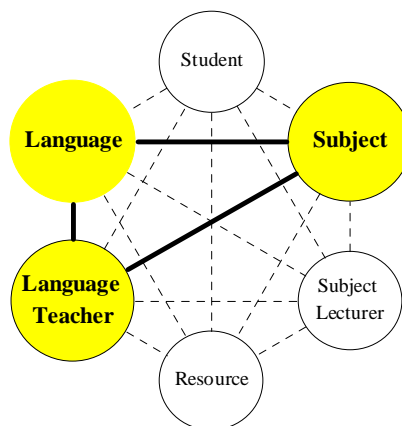


Fig. 5 - Private Battle (Fright, Fight or Flight)

Subset 4 - Safe Haven (Taking Flight)

Subset 4 is the corollary of subset 3. It reflects a possible tactical move on the part of the language teacher. It is seen as a "flight" reaction, a retreat from autonomy, as a consequence of the challenge suggested in subset 3. This three-way connection represents what might appear to be the "safe haven" for language teachers.

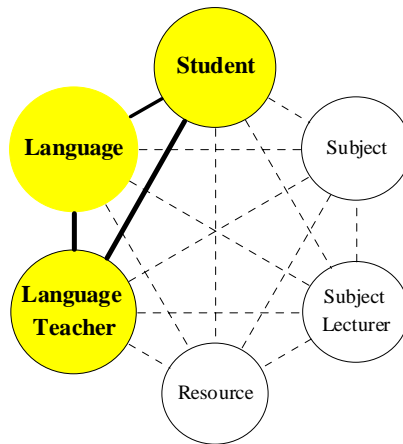


Fig. 6 - Safe Haven

Subjects of the Study

The subjects are English language instructors at a Malaysian university. Their academic training and qualifications are representative of the general profile of the English language teachers at Malaysian institutions of higher learning. The majority of the subjects are Arts graduates, some of are Master degree holders. Only one subject has a Bachelor of Science degree.

Research Instruments

For the purpose of this chapter, two instruments for the study are of relevance, namely, Think-Aloud Protocols (TAP), and Focused Interview (FI). Data on what the subjects think and say regarding specialist reading materials are collected.

Think-Aloud Protocols (TAP) and Focussed Interview (F.I)

TAP is used to provide an insight into what the subjects **think** when confronted with specialist subject materials. Each subject is to tape-record her processing of the four short passages on Architectural History and Theory as she reads and thinks aloud. The second instrument, FI, is used to record what the subjects **say** in greater detail. This is a supplementary tool to allow for further clarification of views expressed in the TAP. Views on other relevant aspects of ESP which may have been left out in the TAP are obtained in this manner. The simultaneous application of the instruments is also a mechanism for ascertaining if responses of the subjects are consistent or at variance.

Procedures

The subjects were given two tasks to perform: to read and set questions on the passages they were given. Each of the subjects received four passages, ranging from easy to difficult in language and content. The subjects were given written instructions and were briefed individually on the Think-aloud protocols' principles and procedures. Following the reading and recording of their processing of the passages, the subjects were interviewed and encouraged to elaborate on their views on ESP teaching and learning, and issues in relation to learner autonomy, ESP teacher-role, and prospect of collaboration with subject lecturers.

Data Collection and Collation

The data collected were recorded in cassette tapes each containing a subject's TAP. These were transcribed verbatim. The transcribed data were then summarised. Given the voluminous amount of data collected, it was necessary that the information be condensed and summarised into a more accessible and comprehensible format. For the sake of clarity, only an example of one subject's summarised responses is shown.

Schema Categorization

Without elaborating schema theory in detail, it has been useful to organize the data into Formal and Content Schema. Formal Schema refers to the subjects' background knowledge of the formal, rhetorical, and organisational structures of different types of texts. Content Schema suggests

background knowledge of the content area of a text (Carrell 1983b). These categories are useful in that the response of the subjects could be gauged and understood more precisely. It points specifically to the way subjects could have activated or failed to activate an appropriate schema (formal or content). In either event, the subjects' response would be able to suggest if there was "a mismatch between what the writer anticipates the reader can do to extract meaning from the text and what the reader is actually able to do." (Carrell and Eisterhold, 1988: 80).

Such data is valuable, especially in the context of English, where the language and content dichotomy and overlap still appears to be a grey area for investigation (Fanning, 1993; Kaufman and Brooks, 1996).

The following Table is a sample of the breakdown of comments for one passage of the TAP.

Table 1 Think-aloud Protocols : Sample of comments

Content Schema		Example passage: Post-Modernism
Sub	Background knowledge	Conceptual understanding
7	What is revisionism of Team X lack of prior knowledge therefore dont understand text what is 'this historical legacy'? tectonic elements? ferro-vitreous engineering? Mediterranean vaulted construction? Tectonics of reinforced concrete?	Revisionism in political sense means not progressive, so does it mean Team X was not progressive?
1	What do all these mean? I'm not sure. revisionism of Team X Millennialistic Utopianism ferro-vitreous engineering	no comment
5	Post-Modernism, have seen this phrase before, not sure what it means revisionism of Team x, dont understand this. Who is Portoghesi? Is he the writer of "The Presence of the Past"? the major monuments of the period, what period? What is deconstruction? Historical legacy, what legacy is this? tectonic elements, compositional models- diff. Who is Schinkel? Doesn't say Who is Venturi?	Millennialistic Utopianism' what a mouthful! I know Utopia but what is this?

	ferro-vitreous engineering - this is technical stuff the irreducible nature of tectonic construction'?	
3	have problem understanding the text because it is heavily laden with specific terminology assumes a lot of prior knowledge on the subject Who is Portoghesi and what does his thesis say? What's Modernism and hence Post-Modernism	Find the text has an interplay of not just arch. knowledge but also philosophy -'cosmological cabalistic mysticism' Not just knowledge of the subject but the ideology Don't understand half of what's going on

From the TAP, most subjects demonstrate that they are capable of interrogating the authentic texts. This should suggest a degree of autonomy on the language teachers' part despite their obvious lack of familiarity with the subject content. The subjects asked questions that would point to the gaps in information that they and many of the undergraduates have. In this regard, the subjects' responses to unfamiliar specialist texts may be productively exploited to demonstrate independent inquiry. What the subjects perceive to be their weakness could in fact be an advantage. The students as 'unpractised' readers (Cooper, 1984) could be helped to construct meaning utilising linguistic cues at the systemic level as the subjects did, while being encouraged to activate their schematic knowledge (subject knowledge) together with the language teachers. A collaborative learning and teaching effort in an attempt to fill up the gaps in the "interpretive procedures for achieving a match between ... schematic knowledge and the language which is encoded systemically" (Nunan, 1991:68) The subjects' ability to engage with the texts at this level could be harnessed to assist students in their construction of meaning.

The findings, however, suggest that none of the subjects see this as a strength and potential learning strategy to be shared with the students. This is for two reasons: the apparent need to maintain a teacher-dominant position in the classroom and the tendency to take flight when confronted with unfamiliar subject material. Consider the contradictory comments from the same subject,

"... spending time finding my own answer first, then bring it up to class; students would have some kind of ideas having gone through their lectures. They would put in words and present to me ... therefore I'd be enlightened while at the same time they're making themselves clear."

"We cannot help the students (to cope with the reading materials of the subject area) because we lack the knowledge."

Other subjects have also expressed views such as those below. These comments suggest that the subjects were concerned about their teacher status and image. They appeared to be unprepared to expose their vulnerability.

“I will carefully choose texts manageable to myself.”

“(If) students have knowledge, (a) teacher doesn’t, (it’s) pointless, (teacher) can’t contribute to discussion.

“If you are not sure, (the) students will know that. They’ll lose confidence in you. Language teachers have to do a lot of explaining.”

“The role of ESP teachers – linguistic-based, stick to structure.”

“To a certain extent, ESP is primarily language learning which does not have to be subject-related.”

“Yes, I feel bad about bothering the subject lecturer. I’m afraid that he may be questioning my intelligence.”

“If I’m the language teacher using this (architectural history) text, I personally would [sic] not know what would be [sic] my teaching purpose.”

Overview of the Study

Observations arising from the research suggest the following.

From the TAP, all the subjects have demonstrated that they are capable of interrogating the authentic texts on Architectural History and Theory in their attempt to construct meaning from passages of a range of language and content difficulty. It was found that they invoked mostly their formal schema to make sense of what they read. As suggested by Aslanian (1985) schematic knowledge structures can either facilitate or inhibit comprehension according to whether they are over- or under-utilised. The subjects’ over-utilisation of the formal schema appeared to have prevented them from invoking their content schema. Notwithstanding their ability or apparent

inability to interrogate the passages and divine the intellectual concepts therein, the subjects invariably retreated to a defensive position for their lack of background knowledge. This pattern of behaviour was observable irrespective of the nature of the authentic passages in terms of the level of difficulty in language and subject content. The implication is that this retreat undermines autonomy on the part of the teacher and learner.

When asked to utilise the passages as input for ESP for a group of architectural undergraduates the subjects did not fully exploit their ability as reflected in their mental processing of the passages. Most of them fell back on a middle ground of what might be described as content-constrained comprehension questions. In most instances they did not explore beyond the confine of the passages despite the queries that arose in their TAP. This may be explained by the examination and the textbook formats they are accustomed to. Consequently, this resulted in a missed opportunity. The subjects failed to see their questions and uncertainty as facilitating tools for autonomous learning. Instead they saw the gaps in their subject knowledge as a major stumbling block in their attempt to comprehend the passages and ability to perform before the students.

The behaviour pattern as described above appears to be closely related to the subjects' need to maintain control. The FI findings clearly suggest such tendencies. The subjects did not go beyond the passages with any degree of authority, nor did they demonstrate that they have the confidence to surrender their dominant role in the classroom. They appear unprepared to forego the authority that they have or are accustomed to. Subsequent interviews confirm the subjects' apprehension in dealing with authentic subject materials and their unconsciousness of their demonstrated capability for independent and critical thinking.

Judging from the FI findings the subjects came across as vacillating between a desire to share with the students their difficulties in processing the authentic materials and a need to maintain a teacher-dominant position. The only way they can maintain this position is to operate within the immediate confine of the passages by the use of comprehension-types questions. This tendency could be compared with the subject lecturer who using his prior knowledge invariably views the text as a starting point and not as an end in itself.

Evidence from the study points to the hierarchical imperative which outweighs the opportunity for a more collaborative relationship between the student and the language teacher,

and between the language teacher and subject lecturer. This therefore defines the current limit of the practice of ESP as studied.

Future Development

To create the climate and culture for autonomous learning, the challenge lies in creating openness in a predominantly hierarchical environment. As Breen and Mann (1997) propose, teachers of autonomous learners need to be self-aware. They need to be able to understand and accept both their strengths and weaknesses. They should also develop a climate of trust and belief to encourage independent thinking and practice. In addition, the teacher must be prepared to involve the learners in decision making. Risk taking and risk management is another important area of responsibility for the teacher in autonomous learning. The teacher is a resource person, not a fount of knowledge. Equally important, in the ESP context, is the ability to get support from colleagues in specialized fields of studies.

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