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DISCOURSE AND STRATEGY IN ESP

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Abstract: *The paper is an approach to the specific traits of English technical discourses from the perspective of their use as language material in the ESP (English for Specific Purposes) class. the theoretical part provides an overview of some possible definitions of technical discourses and of their specificity compared to general language discourses. The identified features are presented from the perspective of methodological strategies, in an attempt to identify the most suitable approaches of technical discourses in the ESP class.*

Keywords: *technical discourse, discursive features, language elements, didactic strategy, learning style, learning objective.*

1. Contextualization: English technical discourse and ESP

The English technical discourse in ineluctably related to the domain of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) which, at its turn, is identified as an independent component of English Language Teaching (ELT). Its meaning occasionally – especially at the beginning of its existence – overlapped with that of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP), but gained larger recognition in the latter part of the 20th century, due to the internationalization of business practices and its inevitable need for domain-specific professional communication.

ESP is also an essential component of engineering education; it is mandatory that students recognize, identify and use correctly instances of technical discourse, both in oral and written productions, so that they are proficient professional communicators. In this regard, the approach to teaching ESP deserves special consideration.

The purpose of the present paper is to suggest ways in which particular features of technical discourses can be important factors in the choice of the right methodological strategy in a didactic context,

2. Differentiating factors of English technical discourses

In order to achieve these purposes, it is important to tackle the specifics of technical discourses. One of the earliest attempts to theorize technical discourse specificity in terms of its didactic usage were Hutchinson and Waters, who considered discursive purposes the differentiating traits of a technical discourse [1]. They saw its didactic acquisition and practice as an approach rather than a product, and suggested that learners' needs of studying a specific

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discourse are primordial compared to other traits pertaining to language specificity, methodology or teaching material.

Another analysis performed by Strevens [2] identified the following absolute and variable characteristics of teaching technical discourse:

- Teaching is centered around the learners' needs (absolute feature);
- Discursive instances used in the didactic process are related in terms of content to particular professional domains, occupations, disciplines (absolute feature);
- The distinctive language traits of technical discourses, related to syntax, grammar, vocabulary, semantics and discursive analysis are also recognizable in discursive patterns of domain-specific activities (absolute feature);
- It has contrastive features compared to general discourses (absolute feature);
- The approach can focus on an individual skill rather than on the whole discourse (variable feature);
- The approach may disregard any established methodology (variable feature).

Another view regarding the specificity of technical discourses belongs to Robinson [3] who acknowledges that in a didactic environment, a technical discourse is "goal-directed", that is presented with clearly defined objectives aimed at fulfilling requirements imposed by specific professional contexts. Additionally, Robinson adds the needs analysis component which is inherent in the didactic approach to technical discourses. Needs analyses are essential in order to clearly delimitate the area of knowledge in which students' language skills must be practised. To these key components of technical discourses, Robinson adds some characteristics:

- A limited time period for the fulfillment of objectives;
- Student groups formed of adult learners;
- Homogenous classes in terms of the domain of specialization to which technical discourses belong.

Dudley Evans and St John [4] suggest a more comprehensive definition of technical discourse from a didactic perspective, which includes both absolute and variable characteristics. In the authors' view, the absolute features include:

- The importance of fulfilling students' specific needs according to the relevant professional domain;
- The resort to methodology and activities specific to the corresponding discipline;
- Emphasis on language which is appropriate to these activities (including grammar, vocabulary, register, skills, genres, discursive patterns).

The variable characteristics of technical discourses in a teaching environment identified by Dudley Evans and St John include:

- The technical discourse may be related to or designed for specific disciplines;
- The didactic approach of a technical discourse may use specific methodology, different from the teaching of general language;
- The technical discourse is traditionally intended for adult learners (tertiary level institution or a professional context), but occasionally it can also be used for secondary school level students;
- Teaching technical discourses presumes a basic knowledge of the language system, it is therefore possible only starting from at least an intermediary level.

3. Discourse and didactic strategy

Of all the components forming technical discourses in a didactic environment, we will focus on the idea of strategy. When approaching technical discourses in a didactic context, strategy is seen as one of the factors which can make the difference between success and failure, besides a thorough knowledge of technical discourse specificity. As most of the definitions of didactic approaches to ESP imply, the strategies of using technical discourses in the English class differ from general teaching approaches, because the finality of ESP is different. The strategies need to emulate real communication contexts likely to appear in various professional domains, while the activities also need to be adapted to such requirements.

When discussing the concept of "strategy", we need to go back quite a long way. First appeared in the seventies, mentioned by researchers such as Rubin [5], Stern [6], Hosenfeld [7] and others. Over the decades the interest towards English language teaching has increased, the concept of „strategy" acquiring many definitions: „the techniques or devices which a learner may use to acquire knowledge". In Rigney's point of view [8], strategies are ways of facilitating acquisition, retrieval and performance. Another definition provided is that of "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, and more self-directed more effective and more transferable to new situations" [9]. After several attempts of finding a definition that might be accepted by most of the researchers, Griffiths considered the strategy as "activities consciously chosen by learners for the purpose of regulating their own language learning" [10].

All of these definitions of strategies can equally be applied in the approach of technical language. However, it should be noted that the role of the instructor is also essential in the choice of the right strategy. This implies, on his/her behalf, a good knowledge of the domain not only at a linguistic level, but also in term of its professional specificity. In this way, the instructor can choose the strategies which best fit the expectations of the profession from its practitioners. The inevitable question arises: does the choice of the strategy influence language acquisition success? Is the technical discourse better understood, are its principles better applied in real communicational purposes according to the choice of right strategy?

The relationship between strategies and language learning success, be it related to general or specialized languages, has been a subject of debate for many decades and it still is a controversial issue to linguists. On the one hand, there are theories such as that of multiple intelligences posited by Gardner [11] which diminish the role of strategies and see them as relative, once different types of intelligences require different types of strategies. Moreover, there is also the topic of intrinsic motivation, particularly valid in the case of technical discourse acquisition. According to this criterion, the more motivated a person is in an intrinsic way (in the absence of external motivation), the more likely he or she is to succeed in the acquisition of technical discursive patterns. Therefore, taking this factor into account, particularly since ESP learners traditionally have a high level of intrinsic motivation dictated by professional requirements, the role of strategies would also be diminished.

There is also scholarly evidence that using certain strategies in English language learning does not necessarily mean that it leads to proficiency in communication. Porte [12] discovered that underachieving students used different strategies, but the outcome was insignificant.

On the other hand, there is also proof that the high-level students used strategies in language learning more frequently and proved to have a higher level in language knowledge than their colleagues did. Over the years, several studies proved that there is a significant correlation between strategy use and progress in language learning and acquisition, both for general and specialized languages,

When introducing technical discourses into the language class, one of the factors influencing the choice of strategy should be related to students' learning styles. Some students prefer to work in groups, in a context which imitates professional communicational situations,

and practise language functions typically associated to the specifics of their professional tasks: explain, negotiate, argue, agree, disagree, convince etc. Others prefer to work individually, with less interaction with their peers.

A good approach on the part of the language instructor confronted with the task of introducing technical discourses as language material may emulate the structure suggested by Naiman, Frölich and Todesco [13]. According to this structure, successful learning is influenced by the following criteria:

1. The selection of real life situations/contexts in order to use the spoken language;
2. An active involvement of students in language learning;
3. The observance of language as a communicative tool and a system with rules;
4. An extension and revision of language comprehension;
5. The development of critical thinking in said language;
6. The resort to affective demands of language learning.

The criteria above increase the chances of success in ESP as well. Perhaps to a greater extent than in the case of general language learning, people who are interested in technical discourses for professional reasons need to acquire it in a communicative way. They also need to have a central, active position in the learning process, so that they can practise real communicative acts. Moreover, it is essential that the approach of technical discourses develop not only linguistic abilities, but also additional soft skills helping them act efficiently and professionally at the workplace.

Another classification of strategies, useful to consider when deciding the most adequate ways of introducing technical discourses in the English class, is the one provided by Oxford [9] which implies six broad categories:

a) metacognitive (for example intended to ensure self-monitoring, paying attention);
b) affective (e.g. self-encouragement, anxiety reduction)
c) social (e.g. enquiring, raising cultural awareness)
d) cognitive (using reasoning, analysis, summarizing)
e) compensation (guessing, using synonyms)

According to the specific objectives of the course / lesson, the language instructor may select the proper strategies or a combination of these, all with a direct application to the students' field of activity.

The 21st century brought new perspectives regarding the strategies used in language teaching in general, including the specific domain of ESP. The focus in language teaching in the 21st century shifted from purely linguistic elements to a more practical approach, that of using language in real-life situations, in real communicative context. This is particularly valid for technical discourses; the didactic strategies started to be more and more focused on the practicality of their features and on their applicability in real life, rather than on individual linguistic units.

A comprehensive approach to technical discourses, one which should address both linguistic and professional needs, would be a combination of the strategies suggested by Adrienne Herrel and Michael Jordan [14]:

1. Strategies to encourage active involvement.

By using these, students can connect their learning to professional requirements (objects, visuals, actions and they are actively involved in authentic learning situations. For example, students are required to provide technical specifications, to describe figures, to explain graph trends, to identify and label components, etc. The teacher's task when applying such strategies is to adapt the learning situations to the students' English language level.

2. Strategies for language development.

The purpose of these strategies is to encourage learning by doing: students should demonstrate, for example, understanding directions, responding to professional commands, acting according to requirements.

3. Strategies for literacy development.

The development of reading skills is an essential part in the acquisition of technical discourses. For this, strategies should be designed in such a way as to introduce the message of the discourse gradually (pre-reading, while-reading, post-reading). Also, it should create opportunities of contextual learning of vocabulary and of language patterns. Additionally, reading strategies should always be continued with a follow-up, reinforcing language acquisition and content awareness. Ideally, these activities are oral, so that learners practise communication and realize information transfer.

4. Strategies for content instruction.

In order to deal with content, a variety of strategies can be used. Learners may be asked to sort vocabulary in terms of its degree of specialization. (technical – sub-technical – general). They can be asked to identify the key message / function of a technical discourse. They can perform text-reduction techniques such as summarizing and making notes. They can be asked to paraphrase technical meaning in more general terms.

4. Conclusions

The present study aimed to contextualize the concept of technical discourse given its specific features compared to general language discourses. The concept of technical discourse was approached from its perspective of basic ingredient of ESP (English for Specific Purposes). Additionally, the study aimed to connect specific features of technical discourses to the choice of specific teaching strategies.

Both theory and practice is relevant in suggesting that there is a strong connection between the specific nature of discursive features in a technical environment and the modalities chosen to use them as didactic material. As ESP is a specific branch of ELT, it is natural that methodological tools selected in view of its acquisition by learners should be compliant with the specifics of the domains / subdomains which the language reflects. Strategies which emulate real professional circumstances, which empower learners to take on active roles and to be at the center of the didactic process, an emphasis laid on communication and a creative, practical use of the professional language are some of the ingredients of success.

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