Using English for Specific Purposes Skills in an English for General Purposes Classroom: Email as a Genre

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Abstract

This paper discusses a first-year teacher's attempt to utilize English for Specific Purpose (ESP) skills in an English for General Purpose (EGP) classroom. Two classes of second year Japanese university students are asked to complete assignments which are to be submitted via email for subsequent classes. This paper looks at the students' procedural knowledge of communicating via e-mail, as well as an ESP approach to helping students discover better e-mail competency. Also, this paper reviews the teacher's findings in the classroom, and suggests changes for future attempts.

Students Situation

As of the 2007-2008, when the activity described in this paper was done, and the 2008-2009 school year, the students in the School of Contemporary International Studies at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies take a variety of both theoretical and grammar based English classes, as well as courses that focus on communicative skills. The communicative courses are comprised of four areas and bundled together as an Intensive English Program. Those areas are: Writing and Presentation, Reading for Understanding, Oral Communication Strategies, and Discussion and Debate. From 2008 onward, the selection of

classes has been revised to a new curriculum for first year students. As per the departmental website, "As a good command of English is fundamental to the international person, the school of Contemporary International Studies has created a course of study that will maximize the development of this skill."[1]

Focusing on one area, Discussion and Debate, students are required to take four semesters of Discussion and Debate courses, one per semester in set groups of students (A Class, B Class, etc.) When a student has satisfactorily completed the four required courses, the student can then elect to take a fifth or even sixth course of study in Discussion and Debate. The course is mandatory, but it is elective in the sense that the student can choose when to include it in his or her schedule. A suggested timeline of courses, is available online.[2]

Course content can vary from teacher to teacher. Some teachers choose to have students engage in mock debates, while others prefer to have students study historically significant debates and discuss the outcomes and effects on society.

Each course consists of 14-15 weeks of instruction, and each class period is 90 minutes long. The physical layout of the classrooms is also varied. The majority of the classrooms consist of long tables which can seat three students. The desks all face a podium from which the teacher can lecture. Some rooms are equipped with overhead computer projectors, VCRs, DVDs, and other technological equipment. If a classroom does not contain these resources, the teacher can request them for the room. If a teacher chooses to have mock debates, most rooms can be rearranged so that students face each other.

The faculty is comprised of part-time teachers as well as full-time teachers, some native speakers and non-native speakers. This being said, the range of materials being used, and the teacher's goals can vary from course to course. However, all teachers wish to impart to students the strengthened ability to converse in English as well as discuss or debate their opinions upon completion

of the course.

EGP and ESP

English for Specific purposes can be simply described as the opposite of English for General purposes. English for General purposes is the language that is used every day for ordinary things in a variety of common situations, therefore English for Specific purposes is language used to discuss specialized fields of knowledge. (Bowker) In any ESP classroom, the reason the students are studying English is clear, and it is aligned with their future goals. It can be assumed that many if not all of the students enrolled in the aforementioned discussion and debate class do not, or will not go on to become professional debaters in English debates. What is important to note is that the skills taught in these classes should be applicable to any situation in which the student will use English. The idea of turn taking, building opinions, making points and counter-points against an opponent, are all useful in English conversation, but the true purpose, the specific purpose, that these students have for learning discussion and debate skills is not clearly evident.

However, general skills are not part of a specific purpose. One of the benefits of ESP teaching over EGP is that if a student has a desired outcome or use for the English he or she is learning, that student is often highly motivated. They want to become proficient to achieve their accomplishments. Stevens claims that one rationale for ESP is that "it is relevant to the learner." (Dudley-Evans & St. John) Sometimes, EGP students may lack the focus their ESP counterparts have.

From this observation, it seemed plausible to utilize the ESP teaching methods, to allow students to have a defined use for their English. In turn intrinsically motivating them to improve their English abilities, and create skills they could later use in life.

Structure of Email

In the last quarter century E-mail has risen to become the preferred method of digital communication. "Business and academic environments increasingly turn to email to replace the more traditional functions of letters and memoranda." (Baron) The very notion of email is difficult to teach. Email is similar to academic writing in that it "is 'mysterious', that its practices are poorly understood by teachers and students alike." (Lillis) Much has been imported from letter writing style, but even native language learners stumble when composing emails. Baron states that "[email's] usage conventions are often closet to those of the social telephone or face-to-face conversation. People sending email often reveal an editorial nonchalance, reflecting the casual tone of the medium and a psychological mind-set (however mistaken) that email, like the telephone is ephemeral." Many businesses are re-teaching their own employees how to write emails. However, there is no one way to write a correct email. In *ESP Academic Writing for Graduate Students* Swales and Freak stated, "we have avoided laying down rules about what a member of a disciplinary community should (or should not) do in a particular writing situation. Instead we have encouraged users of *AWG* to find out themselves what the conventions of the field actually are." (Swales and Freak) This being said, it is much easier to make suggestions through discovery about what to include in emails.

If an ESP perspective is to be applied to teaching email, email must be looked at as a genre. Flowerdue and Peacock state,

> "a genre is a particular type of cognitive event which has a particular communicative purposes recognized by its users, or *discourse community*. By targeting specific genres as the object of linguistic analysis, one ensures that the description is valid for the specific situation and participants."

From this, one can gather that email, as a genre in ESP, must have three components crucial to the ESP field. The fields are the SUBSTANCE of email, the ACTION of the email and the FORM of email. Additionally, a gatekeeper, the

person or persons who allow the information into the discourse community, must be acknowledged.

First, one must look at the email's substance. The discussion and debate class's ultimate goal is to facilitate all students having meaningful conversations in English, while expressing their opinions. In this instructor's case, he posed a basic question at the end of each class. Sample questions included, "Which animal do you like better cats or dogs? Why?" or "Please tell me what topics you would like to debate this semester, and give reasons why." or "Should Japan keep the death penalty?" The students, possessing at least general English competency skills, some more advanced than others, were to answer the question completely.

Regarding substance, the students had the least amount of difficulty in this field. While form and action may have faltered, students generally stated their true opinions. The responses widely varied, but were almost always on topic and valid.

Next is the action of the email. From a simple inter-office memo to the most complex scientific discoveries, an ESP genre must have an action that it sets out to accomplish. In the case of the university students, the email conveys information via the aforementioned substance, and serves as a written form of communication between parties. "To be successful in your writing task, you need to have an understanding of your audience's expectations … these will affect the content of your writing." (Swales and Freak) The action of the assigned email is to prove to the instructor that the student has an understanding of the topic, and can clearly state his or her position on the topic.

Additionally, the action of the email, or any genre, has close ties to the gatekeepers of the community in which the genre exists. The gatekeepers allow the information to pass if it meets established criteria for substance, action, and form. In the case of email as a genre, the gatekeeper is the instructor. The

instructor takes into consideration the three components of the email as a genre and compares the student's email against what is considered to be an acceptable email. If one area is unacceptable, it can result in the email losing all validity.

Finally, the form of the email appears to be where most students need assistance. While email does come in many varieties, most people would agree that email contains basic parts. The more minute details of those parts are open to interpretation, but emails should contain an addressee, a title, a greeting, a body, closing, and any files that need to be attached. The email must be relatively free of grammar and spelling errors, and perhaps most importantly the email should be able to be read quickly and allow the reader to extract information quickly.

Need Analysis

The needs analysis for this course was conducted in a slightly unorthodox manner. Needs analysis is the corner stone of ESP and leads to a very focused course. (Dudley-Evans & St. John) The goals of the discussion and debate course are to teach the students the skills needed for both discussion and debate. A main component of both debate and discussion is expressing ones opinions. The second year Japanese University students were at times painfully shy and hesitant to express their opinions. While the reason could be cultural or social, what was more important was to find a safe non-threatening for the students to express their opinions. In time, they could build their confidence, and perhaps be more direct in sharing their opinions. To begin, email seemed the most beneficial and convenient means for the students. "It [E-mail correspondence] involves students into the learning process where the dominating factors are interactivity, student centered learning, critical thinking." (Kavaliauskiene and Vaicuniene 2005) This scaffolded procedure for the discussion allowed students to formulate their opinions, compose them, express them to the instructor and

ultimately discuss their opinions in following classes.

Having chosen the activity, the next step was to determine what exactly the students would need from instruction. A needs analysis was created by assigning a question that would help shape the course for the duration of the semester. Students were asked what topics they had previously debated or discussed during their first year classes, and to decide what topics they would like to debate during the first and possibly second semesters.

The students were given five minutes at the end of a 90-minute class period to begin formulating their opinions. Students were then instructed to go home or to a computer lab, finalize their opinion, and send an email to the instructor with the information.

No two emails looked alike. Simply sorting the emails took a great deal of time because students often forgot to identify themselves. There was almost no commonality between the emails. The students had not been taught how to write an email, and that coupled with self-doubting English abilities often led to emails that were difficult to extract meaning from. In lesser case scenarios, some emails lacked mechanical mistakes but were still difficult to read and did not have the ability to be read quickly as is needed with email.

These are some excerpts from sample emails. Names were changed for anonymity.

Fig. 1

Subject :	**Dear Mr.Nick**[Sat, 21 Apr 2007 17:00:26 +0000]
Sender :	*********@hotmail.com
To :	delgrego@nufs.ac.jp

Hi mr.Nick!

I'm A. T. who is 3rd year student!

In fact, I don't remember what I studied last year well....I'm so sorry....

The only topic I remember is about world problem!Plz forgive me.....

Dispite I'm 3rd year student, my English skill is not

good....especially,speaking and talking.

So, I wonder it doesn't any relation with ya class, but through ya class, I

wanna improve my English skill! and in order to do that, I will try to

study hard and I will try to talk toEnglish speaker!!

Thank you! and I look foward ya class!!!!

Fig. 2

Subject :	**No subject.**[Wed, 24 Oct 2007 23:28:53 +0900 (JST)]
Sender :	********@docomo.ne.jp
To :	delgrego@nufs.ac.jp

DDperiod1

＊What did you debate?

-Children should study English early or not.

-Which do you like as pet dogs or cats?

Last year, my crass didn't discuss and debate. Just talked opinions one after another.

So Iam beginner.

The student in Figure 1, Student 1, makes an attempt to build a rapport with the teacher, but the attempt produces quite the opposite effect. The layout of the email is confusing, as evident by the student starting a new sentence every

few lines. The word choice detracts from the message. While the student does complete the assignment by briefly answering the question, the student is more worried about English level. Also, both students do not use a spell-check program. The first student closes with a greeting much too casual for an academic setting.

Student 2, along with Student 1 doesn't title the email properly. This is conducive to letting the email either go unnoticed or possible even be filtered out by some mail programs. Student 2 also starts a new line at the beginning of each sentence. (This is also found in some first year students writing as well.) Sentence structure is weak, with a few incomplete sentences.

Taking into consideration the students first assignment, it was determined that form and mechanics would be a main topic, including titles, salutations, organization, and closings. Students would also have to focus on organizing thoughts and expressing them in the body of the email.

Implementation

After looking at E-mail as a genre through an ESP lens, the next step was to build lessons and materials via ESP that would match the students ability level, teach them the conventions of email, and help correct existing mistakes. These sub-goals would then lead to students writing concise, coherent emails that express their ideas. As stated earlier, the Discussion and Debate class only meets 15 times a semester, so any time designated to this activity must be highly productive. This constraint is not unusual in ESP teaching. Stevens also suggests that ESP "is more cost effective than 'General English'." ESP often deals with fields such science, business, or medicine and is often under extreme pressure to complete research or publications in English very quickly. A workshop, a three-day course, or a weekly seminar is often the timeframe when dealing with ESP.

First, materials were gathered for the students. Very few e-mail textbooks exist, and an even smaller number of EFL e-mail textbooks exist. Many EFL schools and institutions rely on a textbook as the sole syllabus … [this] is often adequate for many general English courses where a suitable textbook exists. (Cowling) EFL E-mail is not in that group.

Students were required to send the assignment via email. In the event a student had difficulty operating a computer, computer lab assistance was available to students anytime they used one of the school's many computer labs. The instructor then gathered approximately 20 emails and built a mini-corpus for the students. The emails were from both native and non-native speakers. Also included were several blank emails, a sheet labeling the parts of an email, a checklist to follow for email completion, and finally, copies of the students' sample emails.

The instructor chose a form-focused instruction approach. Ellis states that a "'form-focused' instruction is used to any planned or incidental instructional activity that is intended to induce language learners to pay attention to linguistic form." (Ellis) As opposed to a more prescriptive EGP lesson, the students were first asked to look at the emails in pairs, and circle reoccurring phrases or words, and also to take note of the general layout of the emails. This activity took about 20 minutes. Next the students were asked individually to create an additional sample email. The topic remained the same, "Please tell me what topics you would like to debate this semester, and give reasons why." Immediately students began to make connections on their own. They noticed a semi-formal style to the emails, much different from how students send mail from cellular phones or even converse face to face. Sentences began to "wrap around" their sentences, not starting a new line for each sentence. Students made comments about the conciseness of the emails and the readability.

Students were asked again to create a new email. This time the topic was

to inform the teacher of an absence and request missed materials or a time to meet with the teacher. Before the students began writing, the instructor went over a checklist the students could use during their writing. Modified from an internet resource, the following checklist (Fig. 3) is easy to navigate and it allowed the students to check for each of the suggested focal areas.

Fig. 3

1. Write a meaningful subject line.   ☐
2. Keep the message focused and readable.   ☐
3. Identify yourself clearly.   ☐
4. Proofread.   ☐
5. Distinguish between formal and informal situations.   ☐
6. Respond Promptly.   ☐

Revisit

As with most endeavors, the students became better with practice. The largest increase in readability occurred during the week following the instruction. Students continued to improve throughout the semester. The following is an email from a student who claimed to have never sent an email in English, prior to the discussion and debate class.

Fig. 4

Subject :	**Student Y, Thursday, 2nd Period** [Thu, 21 Jun 2007 10:54:01 +0900]
Sender :	********@hotmail.co.jp>
To :	delgrego@nufs.ac.jp

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Hi, Nick


Sorry, but I caught a cold and have a fever, so I won't be able to attend your class
today.


I know I was absent from your class several times. so if it's possible that you give
me another assignment for me to complete your class, I will do it.


and as a Homework, I have some news paper articles chosen,


Sincerely,
Student Y
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This student wrote a meaningful subject line, simultaneously identifying herself and which class she attends. The message is brief, but easily scanned by the reader. The student appears to have checked for spelling. This email is not without error, but the readability has improved greatly.

Conclusion

Overall, the activity and its results were very successful. In only a very few cases, the students reverted back to errors they had made prior to instruction. An additional unforeseen problem was the use of cellular telephones. Some students who lack steady internet access via a designated computer chose to send their assignments via cellular phones. Originally, it was thought that any submission from any source would be preferred to the student not complet-

ing the assignment, but in actuality, the limitation of a cellular phone versus a computer greatly interfered with the messages. The students who chose to send assignments via cellular phone tended to have the most mistakes or difficulties with formatting. In the future, it may be beneficial to not accept submission from cellular phones.

Additionally, a supplementary activity may be to have students choose something of personal interest, sports team, musician, company, television program, actor/actress and send email in English to the person or organization. While every student may not receive a personal response, this extension activity will hopefully be highly intrinsically motivating to the students.

Starting in 2008, the School of Contemporary International Studies curriculum has changed and the discussion and debate class has been absorbed into other classes. While debate topics may not be included in the upcoming courses, students will continue to need email skills to interact with academic faculty and perhaps internationally as well.

To conclude the students' emails did become easier to understand, and lacked major flaws. In this sense the intended goal was reached. While no student's email was perfect, the vast majority improved, and this aided classroom discussion. ESP was a useful tool for instructing students how to write emails.

Notes

1   http://www-e.nufs.ac.jp/dept/contemporary/index.html
2   http://www-e.nufs.ac.jp/dept/contemporary/english/course.html

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