
Conference Review

The International Symposium on Innovative Research and Teaching in ESP

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English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is a needs-based, field-specific, and often data-driven approach to teaching English as a second or other language. It is generally considered a sub-field of TESOL, and there are several organizations and events in Japan that promote this approach and support practitioners. The International Symposium on Innovative Teaching and Research in ESP was a new addition to the field, held for the first time in Chofu, Tokyo at the University of Electro-Communications (UEC) in February 2014. The event was hosted by the UEC's Research Station for Innovative ESP Research and Education. It was apparent that the aim of the Research Station was to promote innovation in ESP teaching and research both within UEC and beyond. The event brought together experts and participants from Asia and the US for a full-day's program dedicated to ESP. Included in the program were seven 30-min presentations from experts, a poster session, a panel discussion, lunch, and a post-symposium party.

Presentations

The topics covered in the seven presentations spanned a broad range. Firstly, Laurence Anthony (Waseda University) took the audience step by step, in a three-stage approach, towards describing the application of ESP principles and tools, using a case study of an English course designed for mathematicians. Anthony knows well the challenges teachers of specific-purpose oriented learners

face and was able to demonstrate in a very practical way how the three-stage approach along with collaborating with specialists can assist non-expert teachers in preparing expert materials. This practical and informative first presentation was a highlight of the program for this reviewer.

Next, Stefan Gries (University of California, Santa Barbara) presented cutting edge corpus-linguistic applications for teaching and research. Gries pointed out that “corpus linguistics is one of the fastest growing methodological paradigms in theoretical and applied linguistics” and aimed to illustrate how simple frequency information can be used in teaching situations. For this reviewer the statistics and corpus-linguistic notions presented were far from simple, but I felt this presentation would benefit participants with an advanced understanding of corpus linguistics.

In the third session, Moonsub Han from South Korea (Hanyang University) offered two case studies of successful ESP programs that he himself had developed: 1) the Samsung Business English Program, and 2) Hanyang University College of English Program for Engineering. Han covered the needs analysis, course design, teaching methodology, and materials development—all important features in the ESP approach—of the Samsung project. The results of this program and success of his approach motivated Han to reform the general English curriculum at Hanyang University. The presenter noted that with this approach, Hanyang University is able to link their English education with the needs of Korean businesses and companies in much more efficient way. Prof. Han’s relaxed and colloquial style made this an enjoyable presentation, with many lessons for Japan-based teachers to glean from the Korean context.

In the fourth session, Cai Jigang from China (Fudan University) gave a background of ESP in China. Thirty years ago when the Cultural Revolution ended, many subject specialists were teaching content in English, which according to Jigang was not as effective as it aimed to be. The presenter went on to focus on the present and more effective Framework of Reference for EFL Teaching at Tertiary Level in Shanghai. Jigang has been active in promoting the implementation of ESP at the tertiary level in mainland China. Some of the barriers he has faced in this endeavor may also be relevant to ESP in Japan, such

as teachers' lack of specialist knowledge, learners' proficiency levels, etc.

In session five, Winnie Cheng, (Hong Kong Polytechnic University) presented findings from some of her recent ESP research projects. In particular, she focused on a project looking at patterns of working languages in utility engineering in HK. This project was a collaboration between ESP teachers/researchers and industry, an approach driving many successful ESP projects in HK. Based on this study, Cheng was able to present a clear overview of the language used within the vocation, including the top five written and spoken genres, the top five most important aspects of spoken English communication, and the top five most difficult aspects of spoken English. Given the presenter's huge wealth of experience and body of research in ESP, this 30-minute time slot was not enough to get the full value out of her expertise.

In the sixth presentation, Theron Muller (University of Toyama) guided participants through his research on academic literacy. In particular, by examining preliminary findings from his four cases of Japan-based language teachers Muller looked at how well teachers themselves are prepared for writing for academic publication.

In the seventh and final presentation, Jie Shi (The University of Electro-Communications) reported a case study of the ESP program that she developed for undergraduate science and engineering students at UEC. Shi spoke passionately of the urgent demand for more efficient English education in Japan, and the need for Japanese students to move beyond a passive role as language learners, and towards engaging in the target language ("taking of the Japanese diaper," as she referred to it).

Posters

In addition to the seven expert presentations, 17 posters were presented during an hour-and-a-half-long poster session on an even broader range of ESP research and applications. A full review of the 17 topics presented is beyond the limits of this review but a few topics of highlight for this reviewer were Materials Development for Science Students (Keiko Hattori), Acoustic Characteristics of English Oral Presentation Speech (Tomoko Hori, et al.), The Process-oriented

Needs of Japanese Business Undergraduates (Janice Nakamura), Genre-based Approach to Teaching and Analysis of Research Abstracts Written by Japanese University Students (Uma Maheswari Rajagopalan, et al.), A Move-analysis-based Approach for Japanese Science and Engineering Students (Masako Terui), and Feedback Methods of Phonetic Evaluation for Japanese University Science and Engineering Students (Suwako Uehara).

Panel

In the final session of the program, six of the seven invited experts came together for a panel discussion focusing on the topic “ESP in Globalization in Higher Education—Current Practices in Asia.” The panel discussion went for more than 60 minutes, and participants heard views and opinions from the panelists, covering a wide range of settings in Japan, China and Korea. Audience participation was not as lively as it could have been, and discussion bounced mainly between the experts and their experience. Perhaps given the broad and nature of the topic, it was beyond the discussion to reach any consensus or conclusions, and the underlying theme of ESP became the focus.

This was certainly a full day’s program. Lunch was kindly provided by Cambridge University Press, and a post-symposium party, hosted by the UEC’s Research Station for Innovative ESP Research and Education, gave participants more opportunity to interact and enjoy themselves. At the end of the event, this reviewer felt that the teachers at UEC were very fortunate to have an international ESP event like this held in their own university. In addition, the ESP community of Japan was fortunate to have another event in which they can come together, share professional experience and knowledge, and strengthen the ESP networks. It is unclear if this event will continue into the future, but given the good number of participants and the interest in ESP, here is hoping that it will.

Author Bio

Leigh McDowell has an undergraduate degree in applied science, and a master’s degree in education. He has taught English in Japan since 1999. Currently, he teaches graduate students at the Nara Institute of Science and Technology. He is

interested in ESP, especially as used in the international scientific community. leigh-mcdowell@ms.naist.jp

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