
An Interview With Alan Waters

Alan Waters is currently a Teaching Fellow and the Coordinator for Teacher Training at the Institute for English Language Education at the University of Lancaster. Until recently, he spent four years working on the M.A. in EST program at KMIT Thonburi (King Mongkut's Institute of Technology). He has taught English and also done teacher training in Africa, the Middle East and England. He is the co-author of *Interface* (Longman) and *ESP: A Learning-Centered Approach* (C.U.P.). During a visit to Thailand in 1988, PASAA had the privilege to interview Mr. Waters. The interview proceeded as follows:

How did you become interested in EST?

It was after I worked in ESL in Africa. I wanted to find something different. At that time, most of the interesting work in EST was being done by Trimble and his associates, in Washington State. I had the privilege of attending part of one of his summer Institutes at Seattle, and this was what really sparked my interest in EST. I got a job teaching EST at the University of Kuwait, and I tried to put some of Trimble's ideas into practice. Others there were also trying out new ideas related to EST—Jim Herbolich's "Box Kites"¹ is a good example of some of the work that was going on there at that time.

How would you define EST? What makes it different from general English?

EST, like any area of ESP, is an attempt to base English language teaching on learners' needs. This is in contrast to so-called General English teaching, which exists for its own sake—it doesn't have to be justified by saying that it's meeting this or that particular communication need. In EST the focus is specifically on communication needs involving science and technology. You identify those needs, and then try to design your course to meet them.

The most important thing to grasp is that EST is an *approach* rather than a particular set of materials, or a particular method. In other words, EST is not a special kind of language (a commonly held view): it is a special approach to ELT, a needs-based one.

What language points/focus may be assigned to EST?

There is a tendency in EST to teach a rather restricted form of language, the "textbook" style of communicating about science and technology in English. This means that there is often less emphasis on teaching the more common forms of English that are the basis for communicating about science and technology. As a result, the language taught in EST courses is often not broad and

¹ See Swales, J. (ed.) *Episodes in ESP*, Pergamon.

varied enough. The research Tom Hutchinson and I did showed that specialised language use is *competence-based*. In other words, it depends on knowledge of non-specialised language. This is what EST really needs to focus on.

What are the current trends in teaching EST?

I mentioned one earlier on—the idea of EST as a register of English, involving teaching a lot of technical terms, and so on—the “special language” concept of EST. This view still exists, but it is waning. Another approach is based on the idea that it is not vocabulary and grammar which is specialised in EST—rather, it is the structure of the text, the “stretch of discourse”. Thus, in this trend, text organization is the main focus. This approach is the “rhetorical discourse analysis” one.

Another approach is the “target situation analysis” one. This concentrates on analyzing what the learners have to do with language in the target situation. The “high priest” of this view is John Munby, and the “Bible” is his book “Communicative Syllabus Design”. It is an attempt to be as systematic as possible in analyzing needs and basing the course design on the results.

Another major approach, widely used in Malaysia and Latin America, is a “skills” or “strategies” one. According to this view, it’s not so much the language that should be the focus of EST, but what underlies the language—the micro- or sub-skills which make up the four main skills.

Finally, there is a “trend” that I and others have been associated with, which emphasises that it is not so much the content

of EST (the “What”) which should be our main concern, but the “how”, the learning process. This is a “learning-centred” approach. We feel the learning side of EST is crucial, and it has tended to be neglected by the other approaches.

If I may, I’d also like to outline two possible future trends for EST in Thailand. First, I hope there will be a movement in the direction of EOP (English for Occupational Purposes). Right now, most EST in Thailand is the academic purposes variety (EAP), but I think that in the future—especially at the college level, and in university “extension” programmes—there will be more and more interest in the idea of having EST courses for job purposes. Secondly, I hope that in the secondary school sector there will be much more work done on teaching learners the everyday language of science and technology. At the moment most of the materials being used exclude this. If more learners knew this kind of language they would be much better prepared for their post-secondary studies/work.

Do you have any recommendations for designing syllabuses for EST?

I think the main problem is that the syllabus is often specified in too much detail to allow good materials to be developed. When the materials have to match a syllabus which has too much detail, you lose the chance to make the materials interesting, challenging, enjoyable and learnable. You have to keep on just matching them up to the linguistic specifications instead. So I would argue that we should start with a much looser set of specifications for the syllabus, not so much detail. This gives materials writers a chance to be creative. Later you

can make a detailed syllabus and check that there's an appropriate degree of correlation between that target syllabus and the syllabus of the materials.

**What are the criteria for selecting materials?
To what extent should they be adapted?**

As far as evaluating materials is concerned, you need to find answers to two main questions :

(1) What are the language needs of the students?

(2) What are the characteristics of the learning situation?

The second question is the one which tends to get ignored. To answer it, we need to ask further questions such as : Are the materials suitable for the learners as *learners* of language? Is the content of interest in its own right? Do the learners get chances to use their existing knowledge? Are the activities really challenging? What about the teachers—are the materials suitable for them? Do they have the necessary background? And so on. In my experience, it is elements like these that tend to be overlooked when developing a syllabus. The focus tends to be mainly on language factors. Or we tend not to judge the materials systematically at all. Often teachers don't know what or how they want to teach. The starting point, therefore, is *self-evaluation*. Evaluation of materials then becomes easier because you have a sense of your learners' needs and goals as a teacher—you have a framework from which to select and adapt EST materials.

What are the best techniques for teaching EST?

It would be quite wrong to say that there is any one way to teach EST. However,

I think the most basic elements in *one* sound approach to EST can be found in the "Box Kites" article I mentioned earlier. The technique there is to find something interesting in science and technology for the learners to do, and in the course of doing it, to help them to learn English. This is in opposition to the traditional approach where there's no obvious reason to study the English because there is no opportunity to apply it. In other words, I believe *one* sound approach to teaching EST is to center the work on doing a task or solving a problem, and then fit the language into that process, as needed.

What are the criteria for evaluation in EST?

In EST we are preparing learners to function in a situation outside or beyond the course, so it is essential to evaluate how successful learners are once they get to the target situation. Exactly what criteria to use will depend on what your course has been focusing on. This is hard to generalize about because it will vary from situation to situation.

The really important thing about evaluation is to actually *use* the results to improve our courses and our teaching. Also, it's a good idea to make evaluation a participatory process by involving the learners themselves, for this gives you (and them) a better picture of the situation. There are risks here, but there's much more to be gained than lost.

We need to realise that evaluation is not straightforward, however. Students don't always learn what we teach. In fact, a lot of research suggests that different students learn quite different things even though they are all in the same class. There are so many variables involved that it is difficult

to get clear results in terms of specifying that X was learned as a result of Y, and so on. We simply have to accept this. But this doesn't mean we don't get any useful information from evaluation studies—far from it. We have to keep trying to improve our evaluation techniques, while remaining realistic about the value of the results.

Would you like to give some suggestions to teachers of EST?

A lot of teachers view EST rather negatively, as a kind of Siberia of English language teaching to which they have been banished—a sort of prison sentence. In fact, they should view teaching EST positively because this kind of attitude is likely to make their teaching better (and vice-versa). They should try to see teaching EST as a chance to educate themselves, to learn. This, in turn, will inspire their students to learn. Also, it's worth remembering that as a teacher of EST, your students are likely to be among the brightest, and they deserve to be taught accordingly.

Are there any materials you recommend for teaching EST?

Unfortunately, most published EST materials are not very good. The basic problem is that so many of them are so dull. For example, in *Nucleus* the language is

relevant but the methodology is very boring. In the *Focus* series you have both inappropriate language and dull methodology. The *Skills for Learning* material doesn't concentrate on the language side very much; it focuses on micro-skills for the sake of micro-skills, and does little interesting beyond that.

Of course, as an alternative there is *Interface*, but I wouldn't like to blow our own trumpet!

Have you conducted any studies or research in EST?

My main research in the past has involved looking at the communication needs of EFL learners in British technical colleges. At present, I am looking at methods of teacher training in EST. For example, I have been trying to see if the *M.A. in EST* at KMIT is succeeding in terms of improving practice when the teachers go back to their normal teaching situations. So far, the results look very promising, I'm pleased to say. I'm also working with colleagues at Lancaster on investigating the use of the "language learning experience" as an EST teacher development procedure, and we are also about to start some research into the use and effectiveness of the workshop in EST teacher development. (If any readers would like further information about this research, please write to me at IELE, University of Lancaster, Lancaster, England.)

Notes : This interview was conducted by Supanee Tiancharoen, Wattanawan Sanguanruang, and Harutai Kittiampon, while Edward Graybill transcribed and edited it.