English for Occupational Purposes

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Introduction

English for occupational purposes (EOP) refers to the specific ways English is used in different work and professional situations. It is often considered to be one of two main subdivisions of English for specific purposes (ESP), the other being English for academic purposes (EAP). Like English for specific purposes or language for specific purposes (LSP), the history of English for occupational purposes is closely bound up with developments within English language teaching and the emergence of courses aimed at preparing students and trainees to use English in specific professional, academic, and occupational contexts. In fact, the term English for occupational purposes is often considered to be synonymous with the teaching of such courses. The growth of EOP as a major branch of ESP can be linked to the emergence of English as an international language or "lingua franca" of business and work.

Because of their practical aim to develop the language and skills needed for work, what is taught in EOP courses should be based on needs analysis, that is on finding out what tasks will be performed in English in the target situation (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998). Since the mid-1990s, a considerable amount of research on how English is used in different workplace contexts, especially in business, has been conducted; however, there is not always a strong link between this research and what is taught in EOP courses (Bargiela-Chiappini, Nickerson, & Planken, 2007). This entry will provide an overview of research into English used in different occupational and workplace contexts and will discuss the relevance of this research for teaching EOP.

Surveys in English for Occupational Purposes

An obvious way to discover what communicative tasks people carry out in their work is to ask them. For this information to be useful for teaching EOP, it is important to know which tasks are performed in English, rather than in the national language. Surveys have been carried out in a number of countries to find out such information, for example Barbara, Celani, Collins, and Scott (1996) conducted a survey to discover how English was used in a variety of business organizations in Brazil; and in a more recent survey, Chew (2005) focuses specifically on the tasks carried out by new graduate employees in the banking sector in Hong Kong. In the European context, a widely read magazine for English learners in Germany (McMaster, 2008) conducted a survey among approximately 1,000 readers who use English in their work. The tasks most frequently performed in English, according to the survey results, included reading and writing emails, speaking on the telephone, and reading letters and job-specific literature. Interestingly, the most frequent tasks were not necessarily the ones respondents felt they had difficulty performing in English, as primarily spoken tasks, with telephoning and small talk at the top, were cited in the list of those tasks that were felt to be problematic.

Such surveys are a good starting point for deciding what to include in an EOP syllabus; however, in order to discover what language is used in these workplace tasks, it is necessary to study workplace texts and interactions.

Analyzing Language and Interactions at Work

It is, in fact, quite difficult to specify the characteristics of English for occupational purposes, as this term covers a very wide range of occupations and professions. Many studies have focused on specific occupations, with business, healthcare, and the legal professions receiving special attention. In order to discover what is distinctive about EOP, a useful question to ask is how it is different from everyday language. Drew and Heritage (1992, p. 22) have identified three dimensions of interaction that distinguish institutional talk (of which workplace talk is a subcategory) from everyday conversation:

1. *Goal orientation*: "an orientation by at least one of the participants to some core goal, task or identity . . . conventionally associated with the institution";
2. "*Special and particular constraints* on what one or both of the participants will treat as allowable contributions to the business at hand"; that is, on what it is considered appropriate to say or how interactions are structured;
3. "*Inferential frameworks and procedures* that are particular to specific institutional contexts"; that is, what is said and done is interpreted against the background of the institutional context.

The impact of these three dimensions is that the language used in the workplace is more restricted in many ways than that used in social interactions. A further characteristic of workplace interactions (and institutional interactions in general) is that they are often asymmetrical (Heritage, 1997); that is, there is often a difference in the relative power or relevant knowledge between the participants, for example between doctors and patients or bosses and employees.

Beyond such general insights into the distinguishing features of language used in the workplace, corpus analysis has provided useful quantitative findings on the characteristics of English for occupational purposes, in particular in business situations, since around 2000. A corpus is a computer-based collection of written or spoken texts, which can be analyzed for recurring linguistic features using a number of analytical tools. Two corpora of spoken workplace interactions are:

- the Cambridge and Nottingham Business English Corpus (CANBEC) consisting of 64 meetings (approximately a million words) from business sectors (mostly in the UK) such as the pharmaceutical industry, information technology, and manufacturing;
- the business subcorpus of the Hong Kong Corpus of Spoken English (HKCSE) consisting of 30 hours (262,000 words) of workplace interactions in Hong Kong businesses.

The latter corpus includes a wide range of workplace situations, such as interviews, service encounters, and telephone conversations, while CANBEC consists mostly of meetings.

By comparing the language used in workplace corpora like this with corpora consisting of social interactions, it is possible to gain an insight into which words, expressions, and phrases are frequent in occupational settings. A comparison of CANBEC with a subcorpus consisting of social and family conversations from the Cambridge and Nottingham Corpus of Discourse in English (CANCODE) revealed some unexpected findings (Handford 2010). Not only were words typically associated with the world of work, such as *meeting*, *business*,

or *order*, more frequent in CANBEC; but so were some fairly general words, for example *problem* and *issue*, as well as grammatical words, such as the pronoun *we*. These findings point to the importance of problem solving as a key activity in the workplace and the emphasis on the group (the team, professional group, or organization), rather than the individual. Such quantitative findings based on the analysis of large amounts of text provide valuable information for course book writers and syllabus designers. Corpus findings are beginning to have an impact on the content of EOP course material, as shown in some recent publications, such as McCarthy, McCarten, Clark, and Clark (2009)—a corpus-informed business grammar.

Besides corpus analysis, which is a fairly recent method for analyzing workplace inter-actions, discourse analysis, conversation analysis, and genre analysis are frequently used to study the ways in which English is used in occupational settings. Discourse analysis is a qualitative approach to examining how language is used in written and spoken texts within particular social contexts. Conversation analysis is similar; however, it focuses exclusively on spoken interactions and involves a particular method of analyzing such interactions in great detail and attempting to make sense of them from the participants' point of view (see Drew & Heritage, 1992). Genre analysis can be described as a type of discourse analysis that aims to describe the characteristics of particular text and interaction types that recur in specific social and institutional situations and display regular pattern-ing. As language is frequently used in the workplace in specialized types of text (e.g., correspondence and reports of various kinds) or spoken interactions (e.g., meetings, presentations, job interviews), genre analysis is a particularly useful method for describing workplace language. A genre can be described as having a particular communicative purpose (or set of purposes) and a particular structure and lexicogrammatical patterns (Bhatia, 1993).

Workplace genres can be identified at a fairly general level (see Yates & Orlikowski, 1992); for example, a genre such as the workplace meeting occurs across different occu-pational sectors and is characterized by distinctive, recurring features, such as the role of the chairperson, minutes, and an agenda (even if not all meetings have these features). Other genres are only used in a particular occupation or workplace, and some genre studies have focused on identifying the range of different genres used within a profession or organization and examining how these interact with one another. An example of this is Devitt's (1991) study of all the texts written and used by tax accountants and how these written genres are integral to their work. In terms of pedagogical applications in EOP teaching, identifying the characteristics of genres that are frequent across occupations provides useful insights for courses aimed at heterogeneous groups of EOP learners. On the other hand, for groups of homogeneous learners from the same occupational group or workplace, for example in the case of on-site teaching, surveying, and analyzing the specialized genres used in that particular occupation would be useful for identifying the specific needs of such groups.

The Social Dimension of English for Occupational Purposes

The kind of patterning identified in workplace genres is revealing not only of the language used, but also of the people who use the genres and of how they interact with one another. Genres are used and recognized by groups, not just by individuals, and therefore they tell us a great deal about the groups or "communities," such as occupational groups or co-workers, who use them (see Wenger, 1998, on "communities of practice" and Swales, 1990, on "discourse community"). Researchers investigating workplace discourse using discourse analysis as well as genre analysis have become increasingly interested in the social and

interpersonal dimension and the role played here by language. Examples of research in EOP with such a sociolinguistic orientation can be found in studies deriving from the Wellington Language in the Workplace Project, a database of workplace interactions from a variety of occupational settings in New Zealand, such as government departments, small businesses, and factories (see Holmes & Stubbe, 2003). Social aspects of workplace interactions investigated include power and politeness, humor, small talk, and gender (e.g., Holmes, Marra, & Burns, 2001; Holmes & Stubbe, 2003).

This move toward a more social orientation of research in EOP is paralleled by a more holistic approach to teaching EOP. Whereas in its early days the focus in EOP/ESP teaching was primarily on vocabulary and grammar, it is now more on communicative skills, including social skills. Belcher (2004, p. 173) summarizes this trend as follows:

> Perhaps because of their heightened awareness of the array of social, material and affective factors that can motivate and facilitate language learning, and of what language learning can accomplish beyond smoother workplace interactions, some number of on-site EOP specialists now see their role as widening to include more than language teaching.

Nevertheless, there is still a gap between research and teaching in this area (at least as far as can be judged from published course material), and much that can be learned from research findings regarding the language used to perform social and interpersonal functions in workplace interactions (see Koester, 2010).

Conclusion

In sum, English for occupational purposes refers both to the ways in which English is used in workplace settings and to the teaching of courses that aim to prepare learners to communicate in English in occupational settings. With needs analysis at the heart of this kind of teaching, research into EOP is of key relevance to the content of EOP syllabuses and teaching material. The aim of this entry has been to provide an overview of the different approaches to discovering how English is used in workplace settings and to show how the findings from such research can be applied to teaching EOP.

SEE ALSO: Conversation Analysis and Institutional Interaction; English as Lingua Franca; English for Academic Purposes; English for Business; English for Medical Purposes; Genre and Discourse Analysis in Language for Specific Purposes; Historical Development of Language for Specific Purposes

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