Chapter

4

Creating specialist or non-specialist texts: A comparative study of ELT and ESP lexical items

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4.1 Background

4.1.1 One of the major aims in teaching a language is to open up to the students the world of language itself. Part of this world is the 'wonder of the words' their multiplicity, their elasticity, their quality of changing in different environments and so on, vocabulary is more than vocabulary items and their frequency. As a sub-system operating within a network of systems that constitute a language vocabulary teaching demands formulation of effective strategies and teaching techniques. Vocabulary is essential to ELT in all its manifestations, viz., EFL, ESL, ESP, CLT and the like. In ESP, however, it assumes special significance where it is to be treated as a frame reference accompanying the professional activity. Special subject matter is crucial to any definition of ESP. There is an implicit suggestion as Robinson (1983) points out, that "language use varies from subject area and that there will be variety in terms of linguistic forms, language functions, linguistic activities and subject matter". The researcher accordingly believes that special subject matter, among other things, depends largely on a special vocabulary. The preoccupation with special subject matter has led to a strong interest in vocabulary. A review of ESP materials substantiates the view that

vocabulary is a central issue in ESP teaching. This study then aims at specifying how vocabulary selection acts upon the mechanism of creating specialist texts. So as to promote awareness in this regard, a framework by means of which specialist discourse is expected to be tacitly identified by comparing it with non-specialist texts inherently incorporating ELT lexical items is proposed to be complied with. Syllabus designers can accordingly merit from the description, analysis and comparison of both ELT and ESP lexical items on embarking on the tenuous task of selecting and developing specialist or non-specialist texts for different language teaching schemes.

4.2 Preview

4.2.1 The complexity of language plausibly manifests itself when the question of analysis, description and comparison of it emerges as an indispensable requirement of mastering approaches and methods in the context of second/foreign language teaching/learning. The totality of its feature can not be described all at once by one method or a scheme of categories. Language is componentially segregated and different levels of analysis are commonly manipulated. This facilitates the task of analysis and description by enabling concentration any time on divergent but interdependent aspects of the subject. Language as a complex phenomenon operates backed by a network of subsystems. The recognition of the sub-systems, the exact demarcations among them and the determination of their status with the totality of the system must naturally depend on the type and amount of support each of them lends to

the working of the whole. The sub-system that usually seems most obvious and most crucial but often denied the status of a sub system is the lexical inventory or lexis. Vocabulary has been described by Meara (1980:) as "a neglected aspect of language learning". Part of the blame for the current situation has been placed on more modern communicative approach methodologies introduced in the 1970s which shift the focus away from vocabulary and the neglect of vocabulary in the field of English for Specific Purposes has been no less apparent. The most serious difficulties that foreign language learners face in the ESP field based on Ulijin (are lexical Richards and Rodgers (2001:132) believe that "the building blocks of language and communication are not grammar, functions, notions, or some other unit of planning and teaching but lexis, that is, words and word combinations learning." This may be taken as a combination of names of things: actions, objects, qualities and so on. The more words are recognized, the better language users enjoy their environment and describe their experience of it. Learners in fact primarily care about acquiring a sizable bulk of words and decoding the vocabulary system of language.

4.2.2 Successful performance of communicative act is said to largely depend on the meaning- expressing system of the language to which, besides syntax, lexicon offers a substantial support. "Formal transformational/generative linguistics, which previously took syntax as the primary focus, now gives more central attention to the lexicon and how the lexicon is formatted, coded and organized. Chomsky, father of contemporary studies in syntax, has recently adopted a "lexicon-is-

prime" position in his minimalist linguistic theory" (Richards and Rodgers (2001:132). The researcher, in this regard, argues that lexis is not a mere appendage of grammar, it is a sub-system of the language, it is a sub-system in its own right contributing to the total operation of the total system of linguistic communication. Chomsky emphasized the capacity of speakers to create and interpret sentences that are unique and have never produced or heard previously but the lexical view as advocated by Pawley and Syder (1983:191-226) considers only a minority of spoken sentences to serve as entirely novel creations and that multiword units functioning as chunks or memorized patterns form a high proportion of the fluent speech heard in everyday conversation.

4.2.3 Essential to all facets of ELT vocabulary studies assume special significance in ESP as a frame of reference accompanying professional activity. Special subject matter, crucial to the very identity of ESP, depends largely on a special vocabulary. Items of a lexicon are living units charged with communicative import in given contexts. Statistical observations based on the frequency of occurrence are often misdirected. It has been calculated (Richards, 1974) that 80% of any given text is drawn from the 2000 'common words' (based on West's list). The remaining 20% is drawn from the countless thousands generally called low frequency words, i.e., least likely to be known, and it is these that play a key role in the uniqueness of one message from another. Lexical items have, therefore, to be treated not as countable entities but as linguistic devices carrying communicative force. On the basis of this research what is communicated in any instance as something of specialist

or non-specialist category is the product of relationship between the meaning normally carried by a lexical form and the pragmatic features which are perceived to be relevant by the participants.

4.2.4 Hutchinson and Waters (1987:165) distinguish four types of vocabulary as bulleted below:
- structural: e.g. are, this, only, however;
- general : e.g. table, run, dog, road, weather, cause;
- sub-technical : engine, spring, valve, acid, budget;
- technical : auricle, schistosome, fissure, electrophoresis

4.2.5 They claim that the technical vocabulary show significant but small variation with the subject. An extensive corpus of scientific and technical vocabulary is seen to have been detected by Inman (1978) as cited in Hutchinson and Waters (1987:165) to account for 9% of total range of lexis. This technical vocabulary is reported to have been used less frequently than the non-technical. They are also likely to pose the least problems for learners. They are often internationally used and can be elicited from a knowledge of the subject matter and common word roots.

4.2.6 Hutchinson and Waters (1987:161), furthermore, conclude based on the early pioneers in register analysis that the discourse in specialized may be denser and more formalized, but not different in kind from that of less specialized material. The heavier load of specialist vocabulary is not expected to make it more difficult to understand. In

fact, due to the fact that such terms are internationally used, may facilitate absorption. But, in sum, the linguistic knowledge by means of which the specialist text is understood is somehow different from that required to comprehend the general text. To conclude, it is the subject knowledge, not the language knowledge that causes difference in comprehension.