

ESP EXPERT WHO RESOLVES THE AXIAL CONTROVERSY – DR. HALINA SIEROCKA

Teaching language based on the content material the English teacher has not received formal education in has always been the argument that makes ESP the most demanding form of ELT on the part of the lecturer, but also the source of most contradictory, even negating stances towards it. All apart, this fact is admittedly the core of ESP. Discussions, theories, negations of relevance, heated debates, endeavours to establish the discipline of ESP today are more present than ever. In its essence, the form of a professional or scientific domain English language teaching, ESP is thus most demanding of an English lecturer, and most questionable form of ELT, the arguments stretching from defending ESP as the most relevant form of ELT among adult population, endeavours to establish it as a recognizable academic discipline, to arguments negating its very existence outside the ELT umbrella, or the capability of English teachers to teach language tightly connected to the content other than linguistics.

Dr. Halina Sierocka is an ESP expert, she deals with Legal English. She has received double education – in linguistics and law. This makes her so rare, the right person to speak about the controversies inscribed in the very essence of ESP, but also the related fields, like CLIL or EMI. Dr. Halina Sierocka is a lawyer-linguist. She received her MA from the Faculty of Law, University of Białystok, Poland, in 2000, and after that received the MA in Applied Linguistics, from the Faculty of Philology, at the same university. Now she has the academic degree of an Associate Professor, and holds the position of the Head of the Białystok Legal English Centre at the Faculty of Law, University of Białystok. Dr. Sierocka is in charge of the development of new courses (commercial and postgraduate ones) and development of materials, creating new projects, research into English for Specific Purposes (ESP), Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and methodology of language teaching in ESP. She is the author of numerous publications with renowned publishers, has taken part in outstanding domestic and international projects, and has been invited plenary speaker at prestigious conferences and events.

Nadežda Stojković: I have met a large number of ESP practitioners, but you are the very first one who has this educational background, I would say, ideal background regarding ESP. This is my motive for inviting you to this interview. Having all those trainings, I do believe your insights could very much assist other colleagues who are struggling with the content knowledge they are not familiar with at the outset. So, let's start with seemingly broad questions, but through them, I will be driving towards the question of why ESP and why teaching. You did two majors, why did you finally opt to work with those two majors in the form of transmitting the knowledge as an ESP teacher?

Halina Sierocka: Let me also start from the beginning. I wanted to be a medical doctor, but in secondary school, in the last grade, I decided to change my plans. I had a dilemma what to choose, English or Law. Due to some circumstances, I started Law. It was so easy for me as I was a good student, but I felt my English was getting worse and worse. So, I thought of English courses, and in order to get the best possible education, I enrolled at the State University to study linguistics, with true experts and native speakers. For two years I was doing two majors in parallel, which was very difficult. Law studies I could manage with studying from time to time, but when you study a language it needs to be frequent (I do hope my Law professors won't read this interview). In fact I found Law boring, whereas teaching English very interesting. So, I decided to continue as an English teacher, as I had great English teachers at University. I finished Law only because I had invested a lot of time and energy in it. I thought that I would never ever come back to Law. But, after some

years working as an English teacher, I simply got burnt out. At the same time I noticed that Polish people speak General English at a decent level, they do not need to study English to an advanced level to communicate for example, on holiday, there intermediate is enough. In such situations, speaking at an advanced level can even be more problematic. I noticed that people actually need English for professional purposes. This was also the time of Poland joining the EU, the opening up of possibilities of working abroad, and alike. I also noticed that there are not many Legal English teachers. I thought, and I still think that the reason is this background knowledge. English teachers can learn some basics of, say Business English, it is not as complicated as Law is – in every country. I think that teachers were afraid to take up Legal English because they were afraid their students would expect them to know everything, afraid to be asked content knowledge. I had that knowledge, and I decided to take up that challenge. Soon, I realized there are not enough teaching materials, and it all started!

NS: You already raised some interesting points. Why did you think teaching English was interesting?

HS: Oh, yes, that is an interesting question. I have never thought of that, but first of all I think it is related to personality. I love people - I am very sociable, and I like meeting new people! I like getting to know their passions! The answer as to why and how I became a teacher partly rests with my childhood situation. The issue is my parents are disabled. They cannot hear. I do not know the sign language so I use my mouth to communicate with them. I need to get the message as precisely and as easily as possible. The more precise the message is, the quicker it is understood by them, which again saves my time and energy. This ‘precisely’ helps me to teach. I don’t know if I am a very good teacher, but I try to be very precise and very pragmatic, which is rooted in my family situation. But apart from that, I think it is a personality issue. I can see satisfaction and I can see the results. For me teaching is never boring. If a teacher gets bored with a lesson, his/her students will get bored very quickly as well. It is like a warning lamp and it means that something needs to be changed.

NS: There is beauty in that, thank you for sharing it with us. This does illustrate in a touching way the need for precision in communicating the message.

Now let me move on to the next question - what would you say are similarities between Law and Linguistics, more precisely, teaching either?

HS: These are two separate disciplines, although they are both soft sciences. In some of my articles I use the terms ‘language specialists’ and ‘subject specialists’. One day I wanted to see how Law specialists perceive the needs of Law students, and what kind of methodology they use. I think subject specialists could benefit more if they consulted language specialists, in fact both groups could benefit from each other. I did the research through a questionnaire at my University, with both language and subject specialists, how they see each other. It turned out that although they value the other’s work, they hardly ever ask for assistance. They may use the same methodology, yet I would say that subject specialists lack some methodological preparations. My colleagues, subject specialists, are often surprised that you can make classes attractive just by organizing projects, having lectures as a group or pair work. Not that they are bad teachers, but simply during the course of their studies, they were hardly ever taught to do so. My University is now thinking of organizing this type of training. These are difficult issues, and it takes some time to work out your own teaching method. I did some research in which I asked both groups the same question – how do you perceive a good Legal English teacher? Both groups said such person needs to be communicative, flexible, well prepared, friendly, and that specialist knowledge is not that necessary, which is very optimistic. So, it means that if you are a good teacher you can handle specialist knowledge.

- NS:** Why do you think those two groups, language and subject specialists, hardly ever approach each other for assistance? Yet, this cooperation with domain colleagues is one of the key components in ESP. From your experience, why is it so that we do not ask, contact, consult each other? This is a typical situation everywhere.
- HS:** As I see it, when subject specialists have a language issue, with terminology for example, they resort to checking it on the web or in the dictionaries, for example, which is much faster. Language specialists (here in Poland) are usually employed by foreign languages departments at the university, and they provide services for all university faculties, sort of intra-university structure. Very often, subject specialists look down on them. That is why, in my opinion, language specialists sometimes feel inferior, and they are not willing to ask. In cases when they have well established relationships with subject specialists they do ask. It is actually up to the university which has not attempted to facilitate this contact between the two groups. That's the reason. What could be improved (as one can always criticize, but only constructive criticism is acceptable) is to organize trainings. Those could be background knowledge trainings for language specialists, and teaching methodology for subject specialists.
- NS:** When you suggest those trainings, do you mean that specialists from each group would conduct them? So they would witness each other's expertise in that way?
- HS:** Yes, that would be the right way.
- NS:** You mentioned that the university should be responsible for facilitating the contact between the two groups of specialists. Is that so?
- HS:** Yes, the situation here is the following: the Department of Foreign Languages belongs to nobody, so to say. Luckily, the deputy rector at our University is very eager to organize training for subject specialists to increase the number of foreign students to our University. Our authorities have become aware that some help from language specialists is needed, because, for example, as far as methodology is concerned, they are better prepared, better trained than subject specialists who in their studies received no instruction on the principles on transferring knowledge. Some people are very good scholars but not very good teachers, so these kinds of trainings could help them transfer knowledge more effectively.
- NS:** Would you say that the distinction between English Language Teaching (ELT) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is justifiable and in what way? There are opinions that ESP is not a separate branch of ELT.
- HS:** Of course, it is an academic discussion. ELT is a broad category. I may agree to some point that it contains ESP as ESP can use a lot of ELT instruments and approaches. Although ESP is quite a distinctive area, I would not make it totally separate from ELT. If I could present it as a tree, I would say ELT is a trunk, and ESP is a branch.
- NS:** Given that, would you say that some training in ESP is needed at Bachelor or Master studies at latest?
- HS:** Yes, definitely. There should be training, in say, medical, or technical, or legal English. It is of course not possible to cover a lot there regarding terminology, but what is needed is to provide students with the insight of the specificities of various domain fields, tools and methods that they can use in future professions.
- NS:** Is this training to include something of pedagogical conceptualization of content knowledge? And the other side of this question is asking for your opinion how should content knowledge be conceptualized pedagogically?
- HS:** Actually, that is very difficult. First of all, I don't think it is possible to teach all the relevant content knowledge at universities. I don't think there is any university ready to be so generous to allocate a huge number of foreign language classes. We are all very limited with the number of classes. It is depressing. It means that we can only teach our

students some ideas of the subject of specialisation. I have an idea to introduce ‘team teaching’, where during language classes, subject specialists would be present.

NS: Now this brings us quite nicely to the academic distinction between ESP and CLIL. What would you say about their core difference?

HS: CLIL is teaching the content in English, ESP is teaching the language, not the content. You don’t need to be familiar with the content much to teach ESP, although, with time you learn (and teach) the content indirectly. That’s the main difference. CLIL is usually taught by subject specialists. In this way, in CLIL, one teaches both content and language. The emphasis is different and that is a distinctive feature. I consider myself an ESP teacher in that respect.

NS: What is the distinction between CLIL and English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI)?

HS: I think EMI equips teachers with these methodology instruments, it is not a part of CLIL, but a separate category of ELT that helps subject specialists to use content knowledge to provide lectures, seminars, in English. I would put it in the category of ESP as its purpose is to teach lecturers of other profiles to teach in English, that is the specific purpose.

NS: What would you say is the attitude of the publishing houses towards commissioning ESP teaching material? Is ESP not profitable if it goes into specificities too much? Does this attitude prevent larger acknowledgment of ESP?

HS: I would say that a lot of quality material is being prepared. The problem with big publishing houses is that they actually discourage authors by very low royalties allotted. Preparing a book requires a lot of research, time and effort. I prepare the teaching material, but in my free time so it takes a lot of time. I believe that our work is not appreciated. That small percentage received for your work is one of the reasons why we do not have many publications in the market.

NS: Are we living an ESP paradox, that it is highly present within adult population, but as an academic discipline it is being questioned, is this still early time for ESP, is the voice of ESP lecturers not heard enough within academia? What are your thoughts on that?

HS: I think it is the question of awareness. It will come with time, I am sure. I remember when I started teaching here, my colleagues looked at me as if I had been an unidentified flying object! With time they started realizing what I do is useful, they developed this awareness.

NS: When you say it comes with time, does it come down to the personality of the teacher?

HS: Yes, I would say it is the question of personality, but it is true for every job.

NS: How would you identify the directions of ESP that are in need of being more researched on the basis of your practice? Where do you find the areas of ESP that are still underdeveloped?

HS: I would say the question of vocabulary acquisition in relation to how far the student has progressed in the content knowledge in the native language. I found one research, though a very limited one, that claims that this background knowledge is important only at intermediate level. It is very difficult to study that. Other issues I am interested in are technology, team teaching, question of pronunciation relevance, testing, lots of issues to be explored, these being just examples.

NS: We have so far opened so many areas, and I could continue asking more questions and sub-questions, but I hope this will be enough for our readers to get to know more about you as an ESP expert with a unique educational background. Do you know anyone else with a similar background, majors both in the specialist subject and English language?

HS: No, actually, I don’t. I know some lawyers who teach English, but without being officially trained to do that, but someone with two degrees, no.

NS: It’s been most pleasant talking to you, thank you. With this interview I hope to introduce a new format in our journal – interviews with special, outstanding experts in ESP.