
Conference Review

International Conference—Language for Specific & Academic Purposes: Options and Practices of L.S.P. Practitioners

Nicholas Marshall
Meiji University

The international conference for Language for Specific and Academic Purposes: “Options and Practices of LSP (Language for Specific Purposes) Practitioners” was held in the Department of Chemistry at the University of Crete, Greece, on 7–8 February 2009 (<http://lspcrete.wordpress.com>). Crete is certainly very historical but rather inconvenient coming from Japan with no direct flights to Athens. My first impression on arrival was that this area of Crete is very quiet in the winter months; very different from the summer, when there is a huge influx of foreign tourists. The campus is just outside the ancient port of Heraklion, which is fifty minutes by air from Athens, and so conference participants were dotted around the centre of Heraklion in a number of hotels with buses running a shuttle out to the university.

The scale of the conference was modest, given the specialized area of language interest, and there were a total of 130 participants, excluding plenary speakers—40% of these being Greek (mostly from outside Crete) and 60% being foreign. The main focus was on teaching English for science and technology fields, and the stated purpose was the dissemination of information related to research, education, and Good Practice for those interested in LSAP – Language for Specific

Academic Purposes. Professionals working in the areas of English, French, or German for Specific Purposes were particularly invited to participate; however, the conference was conducted in English, and not surprisingly, the huge majority of papers were concerned with English. Topics of interest that were suggested in the call for papers included: needs analysis, top-down and bottom-up approaches, content based-learning, skills development, syllabus and materials design, the use of technology, testing and evaluation, and other related topics.

LSAP stands in contrast with LGAP (Language for General Academic Purposes), where the former is subject-specific but the latter is common core. Another group of papers at the conference was concerned with Language for Occupational/Vocational/Professional Purposes (EOP/EVP/EPP), and these papers dealt with subjects ranging from language and socialization difficulties of post-graduate students adjusting to workplace interactions, to preparing Japanese students for service encounters in the hospitality and tourism industries. The majority of papers at the conference were concerned with three principal areas: needs analysis (the stage before syllabus/materials design and evaluation); corpus studies (with a focus on key vocabulary for specific areas); and text analysis, with an emphasis on metadiscourse (Hyland, 2006) and stance.

My colleague from Tokyo and I tried to cover between us the presentations that we felt were important or relevant to our own work, though as always happens, this was not always possible. The first morning began with keynote speeches from two scholars who are currently well known in the ESP literature. The first, Helen Basturkmen, spoke about needs analysis in ESP. She summarized different approaches and then argued for an expanded framework, in tune with more recent theorizing along sociopolitical and pragmatic lines. A large part of the talk touched on and developed issues from her 2006 book (see references).

The second keynote speaker, Maggie Charles, highlighted another

core area—educational applications of corpus linguistics, the study of stance/evaluation and discipline-specific text. This is a problematic area for advanced post-graduate learners of English who must write their research in English but are confused about the appropriacy of writing nouns vs. pronouns, and when to use the passive voice. Charles discussed the differing conventions across different genres of writing and showed a series of materials that demonstrates to students the relation between rhetorical function and lexico-grammatical realization. I was impressed not only with the subject matter of the talk but also with her emphatic manner, which was very engaging for the audience.

My own interests include pragmatic and functional aspects of language-in-use, and there were two presentations which were of particular interest. Marjatta Huhta and Esko Johnson from Finland discussed their work on needs analysis for ESP in in-company training and Vocationally Oriented Language Learning, using a 'thick description' of needs, involving multiple methods and a prominent qualitative component. The presenters were advocating a more evidence-based approach to needs analysis, and central to this is the idea that in order to acquire occupational or professional language competency, learners need to know the language activities that take place in the social sphere of workplace communication, as the context of targeted language forms. This focus on language activity (discourse) and social context was taken up from a different perspective by Johanne Mednick Myles from Canada. Her research concerned recently graduated engineering students from Asia and their workplace communication problems in Canada, concerning participation in meetings and team projects and engaging in small talk and professional interactions. The difficulties that students faced were not so much in the specialized register of engineering, but concerned the development of the ability to align themselves to the social environment and communicate according to institutional norms, including the use of 'soft' skills essential to

workplace networking and involvement.

The majority of presentations by Greek participants were about the evaluation of post-secondary LSP course needs analyses and learning outcomes, and several presenters showed sophisticated questionnaires and other instruments used to collect data. There were two presentations from Japan. Shozo Yokoyama from the University of Miyazaki showed the methodology and results of a corpus-based study analyzing stance/appraisal in the essays of medical students, comparing learner texts with corpus data from Medcorpus, a database of scientific articles in medicine. The intention of the study was to familiarize students with the generic conventions of expressing degrees of certainty when making statements in scientific writing in English. This project is complex, and I felt that the presentation was very successful in terms of its clarity in explaining the theory, methodology and results. Emi Matsumoto and Bill O'Donnell (Kobe International University) ran a very entertaining workshop on the use of film clips as a springboard for showing cultural and linguistic difficulties of service encounters in English, for tourism and hospitality students. This was a lot of fun, and the presenters' creativity was evident in the way they showed a number of useful activities that even short and banal film clips can generate.

The food at lunch on both days of the conference was excellent in quality and this was a good chance to mingle and meet other participants informally. On the evening of the first day, the conference dinner was held at a restaurant in Heraklion; the food and wine were again very good and towards the end of the evening, musicians appeared and all were invited to follow the Greeks in Kalamationo dancing. It was a long and entertaining night and gave people a chance to network and discuss ideas in a relaxed setting. Immediately after the conference finished, many of the foreigners (including my colleague and myself) set off for sightseeing, and the first priority was the famous Minoan ruins at Knossos.

According to the survey at the end of the conference, 65% of

participants rated the conference as 'excellent' with 25% reporting 'very good'. For myself, as a relative latecomer to the field of ESAP, the major benefit of attending was a big improvement in my broad understanding of topics in the field, plus the bonus of being able to match faces with names, in the case of the leading scholars. Discussing ideas with others in informal settings, especially at the lunches and social dinner, gave me insights that you cannot get from paper presentations alone and helped me make connections between different areas in the field. Overall, my experience was very positive, and for those who are primarily working in specialized areas of language education, there is much to be said for smaller gatherings like this, rather than being absorbed into larger and more generalized conferences.

Nick Marshall received his Ph.D. in linguistics from Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia in 2003. He has taught EFL/ESP in Japan for 15 years and has also taught ESL in the UK and Australia. He is currently working in EAP and ESP at Meiji University.

References

- Basturkmen, H. (2006). *Ideas and options in English for specific purposes*. Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Hyland, K. (2006). *Metadiscourse*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group, Ltd.