

Interview

An Interview with Thomas Orr, August 2009

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*CUE was pleased to welcome Dr. Thomas Orr as one of its plenary speakers at the ESP/EAP conference. We had originally intended to pose questions to him for a conference pre-article in *The Language Teacher* before the conference took place, but that didn't happen. With respect to Dr. Orr and the time he graciously took to provide the answers, we feel it is only fitting to include the "interview" in this special issue. It was not a face-to-face interview, but it will be published like one for clarity, in the same style that CUE published a similar round of questions to the other plenary speaker Mike Guest (see ***The Language Teacher*, 33(9)**, pp. 15-18).*

Q: What is the role of the ESP teacher in the current state of Japanese tertiary education?

Orr:

Japan is changing faster than most university language faculty realize, particularly in fields of science, engineering, information technology, and business. Many of the engineering conferences and seminars I attend are conducted in English, even when the vast majority of speakers and participants are Japanese. And many of the science and engineering departments at the top universities in Japan now hold

government-funded meetings, seminars, and think tanks to consider how to improve the English language competencies of their students in discipline-specific English.

The reason for this sudden interest in academic and workplace English education is that major companies in Japan employ more internationals at all levels in the company now, and international interactions with foreign customers and business partners are currently at all time highs. The common working language of professionals in Asia has now become English, and thus companies cannot afford to hire technical and business professionals who cannot work in this language.

Consequently, there is greater need for highly competent ESP professionals now than ever before, and I expect the demand will continue to increase for quite some time as more and more universities in Japan, Asia, Europe, and elsewhere add more sophisticated English language training to their programs.

Q: What is the general consensus about the background of an ESP teacher; that is, is it better to be experienced in that content area, or to be a well-trained/experienced English teacher in general?

Orr:

Every teacher needs to know the subject matter he or she is teaching and be able to present it in ways that will enable students to absorb the knowledge and apply it effectively. Elementary school mathematics teachers need to know elementary school mathematics; and pharmacy school professors need to know pharmacy. The same goes for English. The specific content and purpose of each English language training program will determine what kind of expertise is needed to generate successful results with one's students, so familiarity with the

work, culture, and language of biotechnology or law, for example, will naturally be essential for English programs that plan to teach students how to work as global biotechnicians or lawyers. Similarly, writing instructors who have never read or written feasibility reports, engineering specifications, or computer documentation will probably find that teaching these genres to software engineering students is impossible without some aggressive independent study.

Q: At many Japanese universities the ESP courses are taught by teachers with little or no TESL/TEFL training or background, often in stereotypical teacher-fronted, large class-size lessons. What is the case at your current university regarding teacher training, curriculum and syllabus design and implementation of both?

Orr:

Our English language program is run by the Center for Language Research, a research institute within the School of Computer Science and Engineering where 11 scholars in applied linguistics, technical communication, and instructional technology study the language and culture of computer science and engineering, and then experiment with innovative content, teaching methods, and technologies to help students and working professionals master that discourse for use in international environments. Each of our classrooms is a site for experimentation, so decisions about course content, learning activities, group size and configurations, and use of supporting educational technologies are based on research and tested to see if they really work. We offer 8 required English courses at the undergraduate level, and over 25 electives at the undergraduate and graduate school level, all of which are relevant to the field of computing. Each of these courses – depending on the course goals and the maturity level of the learners

– typically requires a completely different approach, so we encourage our faculty to experiment freely with new ideas, and we seek to hire experienced academics that are qualified to do this.

Q: Which would you recommend for successful ESP teaching: an experienced EFL teacher with no experience in the ESP field of study, an experienced teacher with a background in the specific field of study, or a team-taught approach. In other word, an EFL teacher with no field experience plus Japanese teacher with the specialty background?

Orr:

Whatever approach works best in your context, that is the one I would recommend. Not only does ESP depend on careful investigation and specification of learning objectives, but ESP also includes careful consideration of student levels and preferences as well as the available physical, financial, and human resources that are available for the project. The best ESP considers the widest possible range of factors and then creates a unique and effective program out of all that is available and realistic. ESP requires high levels of imagination and creativity to generate good educational fits for each educational challenge.

Q: When it comes to field- or discipline-specific EFL courses, would you suggest conducting some sort of needs analysis before teaching the first lesson(s) or before designing the syllabus? What kind of analysis is most beneficial?

Orr:

It is always good to know as much as we can before we make decisions – particularly lasting decisions that cannot be easily changed. At the University of Aizu, we continually seek the comments

and advice of students and faculty on campus, of our graduates in the workplace, of other researchers working in ESE (English for Science and Engineering), and of university deans and company executives in order to continually deepen our understanding and enable us to make sound educational choices. In addition, we continually assess and refine our decisions to see if they are actually yielding the results we want. The ultimate goal of all ESP is a satisfied group of learners that has successfully mastered the English that was targeted for instruction. If our decisions at the University of Aizu are not generating students who are can do well in their university studies and succeed in their careers, then we need to revisit those decisions and refine them again and again until our students become the kind of professionals our university aims to graduate.

Q: What advice would you offer an English teacher not familiar with the sciences or workplace English and yet is interested in becoming an ESP teacher?

Orr:

Different from English for General Purposes (EGP), which requires less career preparation and lifetime commitment, ESP—that is, good ESP—requires first and foremost a long-term commitment to the ESP career path. Second, it requires thoughtful, systematic studies of the target discipline, its English, and its culture in order to achieve a level of expertise that will be sought and respected by students and working professionals who desire to raise their own level of professional competence. Basic ESP instruction for learners at the entry level of their field may only require a small amount of preparatory study (e.g., learn how to help students read and fill in student membership applications to enable them to join the student branches of international professional associations). But if someone wants a successful career in providing

language training, advice, or consultation to members of a particular profession (e.g., to help lawyers write better legal documents), then a much longer, more serious commitment is required to become an expert in that profession's language, culture, and genre. Job stability, benefit packages, professional status, and job satisfaction tend to be higher in ESP than EGP, since the demand for this kind of expertise far exceeds the number of people who currently have it. So I highly recommend to all who are interested in this career path to select a field that matches their interests and then immerse themselves in its language and culture until they have sufficient knowledge to offer a professional level of educational support. Being able to do something that only a few can do is far more professionally rewarding than being able to do something that nearly anyone can do, so I strongly encourage language teachers who plan to stay in language education for life to consider ESP for their life work.

Despite the lateness of publishing these insights from Dr. Orr, his reputation preceded him in attracting a large crowd at the conference. Even when he offers general advice in the interview, the reasoning is sound, and readers should be able to come away with some sense of what to do. We thank Dr. Orr for his contribution here and at the conference, and we hope that others find a measure of direction in his words.