

## **Panel discussion redux: What are the roles of teachers in ESP/EAP courses?**

*Panelists:*

Glen Hill, Mike Guest, and Eric M. Skier

*The CUE SIG felt an interactive panel discussion would be a useful venue to exchange ideas on teaching ESP/EAP at the CUE 2009 Conference at Tezukayama University, Nara. On Saturday, the three of us sat at the front of a fairly packed room of interested onlookers (and participants) as experts in the field of ESP. Our teaching backgrounds are long and diverse, and we are involved in teaching students with somewhat similar majors (largely medically related) but with vastly different career goals and needs. Matthew Apple, who himself teaches at a technical high school with students in another branch of ESP, kindly served as moderator for our totally unrehearsed panel discussion. In an attempt to cover as broad a ground as possible in ESP/EAP for the sake of the audience, three questions (referred to as "challenges") were put to the panel, and they predictably spun off into related tangents as each of us provided our own views, and the audience took turns asking follow-up questions.*

*The entire event was recorded on video, but technical issues made it difficult to present the conversations online, so we decided to review the video record and provide this near-verbatim transcribed version instead. Although our candidness and humor added much to the conversation, we felt it was best to dispense with the levity in this printed form. We hope readers understand that, and that they will take this article in the spirit in which it was intended: To inform those who could and could not attend. All in all, the hour passed quickly, perhaps too much so, and we think we accomplished quite a lot.*

## **Panel Question 1:**

**What is the role of the teacher in the ESP/EAP classroom (as opposed to a generic EFL/ESL teacher)?**

*Mike:*

ESP/EAP teachers should be focusing upon specialist discourse. That is, it must go beyond conversation, structure, and terminology, and into how professionals in that discipline interact in English. What are typical speech events and functions? How are they organized? What governs linguistic choices within that discourse? Teachers should be moving in this direction and not repeating old high school or conversation school formulae. This means that student cognition in that specialist discipline has to be engaged and academic skills developed. Students should be actively thinking about content and modes of communication. This calls for a raising of the rhetorical bar of course—but I think most students are capable of it.

*Eric:*

I envision my role as pharmacy faculty. I want students to think of me as no different from their Japanese physics or clinical pharmacy professor. I'm a school of pharmacy faculty teacher, not just an English teacher. I think it makes a very big difference in the eyes of the students. Some of it is self-taught, and some I've learned from approaching others. I'm teaching the English skills required for a pharmacist in the 21st century.

*Glen:*

I raise the bar two ways. I start out by telling students not to call me by an *eikaiwa* title "Glen sensei". I also tell the students my scientific research background, so they know I'm not simply an English teacher. I have a strong understanding of the scientific attitudes they need in order to bring their English up.

### **Follow-up question:**

**Since all of you have this experience, what advice do you think you could give to someone who first comes into the specialized field from an ESL background?**

*Eric:*

If you're interested in getting employed in some ESP field, don't wait for people to tell you or teach you or ask you something. You have to be very proactive. I've spent summers shadowing my students who have been shadowing (observing and working with native English) pharmacists. I spent hundreds of hours in the background observing and making sure there was no miscommunication or mistakes. It was kind of an ethnographic approach to what kind of language the students need (i.e., what was the language these native speakers were using in real situations?).

*Mike:*

Corpora are very important and useful for teachers who don't have a background in the students' field of specialization, not in terms of learning the individual terms but rather discursive linguistic features, such as how certain strategies begin, how they're concluded, how they connect, etc. A teacher also needs to know what to look for in corpora in terms of sociolinguistic features, typical speech events, and strategies that students need in order to put the language into context.

### **Audience question:**

*In our school, before they choose their majors, we teach critical thinking in their first semester. Do you do any of that sort of thing?*

*Mike:*

Certainly. I don't treat university students like adolescents because

then they will act like adolescents. In the medical field, it's important to get them thinking about certain causes and effects, what should follow logically from a certain point, that sort of thing. Get them to think, and not just learn speech formulas for treating patients. Instead, becoming able to improvise or ad lib using their critical thinking skills or eventually putting together a (medical) diagnosis or prognosis is a focus. It doesn't take too long to do these simply. As a result there is very much a specialist, professional emphasis and students soon realize "I'm not in high school anymore. I'm in a university. And it's a *medical* university."

*Eric:*

Given the choice, I ask for the freshmen classes. Too many other teachers don't care to teach the students the proper attitudes of maturity. By the time they get to graduate school, they are still acting like babies. Teaching freshmen has completely changed their study skills and my relationship to them.

**Audience question:**

*There seems to be some antipathy towards being the role of an English teacher. I am proud of it. Being an English teacher does not mean teaching conversation. You have to promote learner autonomy, you have to have an understanding of second language acquisition processes. How do you respond to that?*

*Glen:*

You're right. In addition to all the (ESP/EAP) roles we've talked about, we teach grammar they've forgotten, we show them how to remember vocabulary. You're teaching the discursive uses of the language, you're a facilitator, too. Give them the chance to make mistakes and see them. But you're also a collaborator, if you're a team teacher.

## **Panel Question 2:**

**It's hard to separate your individual course from the rest of the (content subject) curriculum. Regarding curriculum, is there a specific role you (the ESP/EAP teacher) need to play in your specialized field, and is it somehow different than from a humanities field?**

*Eric (responding to the previous audience question, too):*

I am a trained English teacher, a professional (like the audience commenter), but I have to be kind of "in the closet" to be taken seriously by a lot of students. Freshmen come from schools where they don't necessarily respect native English speakers of English. Students think, "That's their native language; they don't *need* to be professionals." My way of dealing with that is to say that I *am* a member of the school of pharmacy faculty.

*Mike:*

Elements of 'general' English teaching will most certainly come up within an ESP/EAP format, especially in the highlighting and raising consciousness of discrete points. But when certain salient, or troublesome, general grammatical patterns or lexical relationships appear you have to raise students' awareness about them. I try to incorporate this into my own classes within the context of medical discourse so that the discrete rule or function can be made clearer to the students. And, so they're acquiring these general English elements, or having them reinforced, but within the wider and more meaningful context of medical education, not as isolated discrete items.

Regarding our role in developing curricula, most Japanese faculty are not aware of what English discourse means. Many tend to think that we're teaching eikaiwa or terminology. So, I try to get them to understand that we're dealing with both medical (ESP/EST) content and general English study—academic English skill development—at the same time. So, these are acquired together such that understanding

gained in one bolsters the other. It's a more sophisticated role for an English teacher than Japanese professors are usually aware of. I think it may elevate our position in their minds, helping them realize that there is some academic and theoretical founding to what we're doing.

*Glen:*

One way is not to get involved yourself. If you use Moodle with a server accessible outside the campus, students can look up dictionaries, glossaries, and informational links provided by teachers. And, with enrollment keys to give security to each course, students can think of it as *their* site, and continue to learn.

**Audience question:**

*Team teaching was mentioned. Is this built into the curriculum? And, is there a specific role for you in team teaching?*

*Eric:*

I was proactive and tried to get bilingual Japanese professors at my university involved in my classes. There is no reason why they can't introduce their language skills into the classroom in English. But they have zero interest in doing that. I don't know why. They (chemistry, biology, pharmacy teachers) can be really great role models. I have to make them relax by making them realize that they are still just teachers who know what to do in a classroom, and it's been very successful. But if I hadn't gone and recruited professors to help, they wouldn't have. There is no official curriculum behind this teaching approach.

*Glen:*

I've had a lot of experience with making and changing curriculums, both in high school and university. To describe a teacher's role in curriculum for ESP/EST courses, one is advertising. You've got to sell your English department and its abilities to the other (content) teachers.

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Contribute to the curriculum, too, and that means involving part-time and full-time teachers to help create or design courses. A third role is EFL researcher. If you are a content teacher turned EFL teacher, you should get more training in disciplines like discourse or linguistics theory and needs analysis.

**Audience question:**

*In the case of pre-service freshmen students in specialty courses, where we can dispense with needs analysis, what happens when they become intermediate or advanced level students, in terms of monitoring what their needs are? "Pre-service" means they are freshmen in a specialty program, they don't have any current experience, so finding out what their present knowledge is and what they need to learn in the program (a learner's needs analysis vs. a context analysis).*

*Mike:*

At my university, we don't need a needs analysis because we already know what the students are going to be dealing with in real life situations. They will go to international conferences and discuss medical issues, they will give presentations and poster sessions, they will read and write academic medical papers. They may occasionally need to talk to patients and correspond with other medical professionals in English. We know that this is what they will do so a needs analysis is superfluous.

*Eric:*

There is nothing like that (advanced English studies) at my university. Students who are very keen on improving or using their English or finding ways to do something; they're on their own. They also don't have that much time (in pharmacy curriculum). And you have to be understanding of that. You can teach them strategies and introduce ways to foster autonomy, but 90% of students won't use English except in the classroom.

Glen:

At my university, most students take all of their English courses in the first year. They see English as a credit to get out of the way, not as a tool or subject to learn. What we can do to keep motivation going is find things for them to do *without* the teacher (especially if you don't have upper level courses). Self-access centers. Moodle links. ER library.

### **Panel Question 3:**

**That brings us to the third challenge for the panel discussion: the role of the ESP/EST teacher in wider society. Some of us are expected to raise their testing scores. Is that acceptable, to “teach to the test”? Is there a test your students have to take in their fields? Let’s also talk about other fields like engineering and flight attendants, etc.**

Glen:

ETS claims that 60-80% of Japanese companies use TOEIC scores for some part of their careers. It's not the only thing they need, though. We can teach them how to pass the test (test-taking skills) or we can teach them the necessary English to *do well* on the tests (like TOEIC). Hopefully, we're teaching a little of both.

Mike:

Providing standardized test scores is being imposed on us by administration at my university. Most teachers don't want it but we play along because the administration feels they need some sort of “objective” standard, a test score number. But we do this just to please them, it doesn't affect our curriculum much. Some people are under the impression that so-called “objective” test assessments are going to increase their ability to make English presentations abroad and so forth. But I feel that trying to impose numerical assessment of the TOEIC and TOEFL type actually works against the teaching of the specific skills they will need as professionals in the work force or as graduate students or academics.

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Eric:

Japanese pharmaceutical companies are looking for graduates to have good English skills (like in presentations) to meet the global market. Reading is probably the number one sought-after English skill for things like reading to understand FDA regulations, and so on. And in hospitals, remember that there are 2 million foreigners here for whom Japanese is not their native language. Hospital staff who can speak English are pretty much assured of a job. And some students seek jobs outside Japan and need English, too.

**Audience question:**

*I have the same aversion to such psychometric testing. Getting back to the issue of curriculum planning...the idea of continuity over a student's years is so important. Some staff where I work are very supportive of us teaching English, but when students reach graduate school some faculty just want us to teach presentations skills so they can present abroad. Unfortunately, at that point the students have not used or studied English for years. So where do we go from there?*

**Moderator comment:**

*It's not just presentations skills. Glen has talked to me a lot about writing.*

Glen:

I've eased up on the error correction in my writing skills courses. Students in my technical report class can't write a 5-page paper, so I have determined through needs analysis that this is not even what they will do after graduation. Instead, they need to focus on writing emails or perhaps pamphlets, so that is where I have directed the focus of my course.

**Same audience member reply:**

*Wouldn't that depend on the institution? Some have students who will*

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*be going abroad and making professional presentations and sharing research with colleagues.*

*Glen:*

Yes, and even my own university wants those very things from its graduate students, but it's very hard to accomplish that, plus just being able to chat.

**Audience question (different person):**

*So much for the utility of English, but what is happening in the L1 classes?*

*Glen:*

Not much, except that grades there are going down.

*Eric:*

I am asked to read Japanese language reports from students, and I'm surprised at the mistakes that I find. If they don't have the ability in L1, it's not going to help their L2. I met with a lot of resistance when I proposed that a new course in Japanese language be introduced at my university. Everybody complains about their Japanese ability, but they would never consider teaching Japanese there.

*Glen:*

One good thing about decreasing Japanese skills is that it means fewer mistakes to carry into L2.

**Question via Twitter:**

*Teaching ESP/EAP is admirable, it is difficult to reconcile when students are finding it hard to deal with things as simple as the alphabet. Please put this into context with falling college enrollments.*

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Mike:

I think that such low level is the exception rather than the norm, but nonetheless ESP can be pitched at different levels. If students are so weak that they cannot even communicate at the most basic level, perhaps some sort of remedial program may be called for, such as extensive reading, but I don't want to pander to those students who haven't acquired what they should have in high school. Setting the bar too low defeats the whole point of academia and cheapens the value of a university education. Some students will simply have to pull up their own socks if they want that university degree. It's up to them to meet the criteria we set and not for us to lower our standards to appease them.

Eric:

Another course I proposed was remedial English studies, but my university thought that if they passed the entrance exam, then they knew enough.

**Audience comment:**

*And, then there are the students who get in on a sports recommendation. Their English levels are appallingly low. Administration's answer is to push them through the system.*

Mike:

Failing such students is also a legitimate option.

*This was a really fun time for all of us panelists, and we hope to have a similar chance to do it again soon. As mentioned earlier, the hour flew by quickly, and we all would have liked to have made this twice as long in order to squeeze in more. One audience member later actually expressed mild disappointment in our "performance," saying*

that they had expected more debating among ourselves over points with which we disagreed. The fact that we agreed on so much must mean something on a professional level, perhaps that the three of us (who had never met or corresponded about our curricula before that day) think very much alike with regard to teaching ESP courses.

Whether a teacher of ESP courses is an EFL academic by training (such as Mike and Eric) or is someone with a technical background first and EFL training second (such as Glen), perhaps a key point stands out amid all the commentary from this discussion. Regardless of what ESP course one teaches, there is no one way to do the job, so the best way to shoot for success is to get as involved as possible in the discourse and vocabulary aspects and be proactive in creating a syllabus. Schools will usually not provide sufficient, if any, guidance, but if the curriculum projects a serious outlook in the students' eyes, that may instill the proper motivation they need to learn and after that we teachers need to guide them along their respective career paths with the English they need.

**Glen Hill** has taught English in eikaiwa, private lessons, high school, and (currently) university since 1998. He has used his background and academic training in biotechnology research to create and teach various science-oriented classes in all his teaching milieu. As Assistant Professor at Obihiro University of Agriculture and Veterinary Medicine, he serves as administrator of the English Resource Center, and he is studying ways to develop coursework in reading and writing for ESP students. [hill@obihiro.ac.jp](mailto:hill@obihiro.ac.jp)

**Mike Guest**, originally from Canada, is a 20-year veteran of Japan and is currently Associate Professor of English in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Miyazaki. He specializes in discourse-based communication, lexical studies, and evaluation/assessment.

He also writes a monthly column on EFL matters in the Daily Yomiuri newspaper and maintains an online EFL blog at [www.eltnews.com/columns/uni\\_files/](http://www.eltnews.com/columns/uni_files/). [michael@med.miyazaki-u.ac.jp](mailto:michael@med.miyazaki-u.ac.jp)

**Eric M. Skier** has been teaching English in Japan for over 19 years. He is currently an Assistant Professor of English at Tokyo University of Pharmacy and Life Sciences. Over the past few years he has co-authored two textbooks on English for the pharmaceutical sciences as well as a handbook of English for pharmacists in the workplace. He is currently at work on a third textbook and a handbook for nurses in the workplace. [skier@toyaku.ac.jp](mailto:skier@toyaku.ac.jp)

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The screenshot shows the Facebook interface for the JALT-CUE group. At the top, there's a search bar and navigation links for Home, Profile, and Account. The main content area displays a post from JALT-CUE with a large 'CUE' logo. The post text includes: 'Discovering paths to fluency' May 21-22, 2011! The deadline for the call for papers is coming soon: Feb 15, 2011. Below this, it mentions the 10th Pan-SIG Conference Call for Papers at JALT.org and provides details for the organizing committee meeting on Wednesday at 9:53pm. There are also ads for 'Cure Tribute CD' and '110 Custom Logo Designs'.

On Facebook, search for "JALT-CUE."