

ESP: The Textbook Problem*

John Swales

Although ESP textbooks have been purchased in considerable quantities, they have been surprisingly little used. Thus, the ESP textbook problem is seen as being essentially one of educational failure. The major cause of this failure could lie either in the product (the textbook) or in the primary user (the ESP practitioner). The problem as posed thus raises at least two inter-related issues: what should be the purpose and role of ESP textbooks, and what is properly involved in being an ESP professional? However, our approach to these issues is obscured by some of the facts of ESP history, such as market forces in publishing, the status of the ESP practitioner, textbook analysis and trends in research and development, all of which have contributed to the abuse and disuse of textbooks. However, it is claimed that a reconsideration of the role and structure of ESP textbooks would allow them a restricted but legitimate place in ESP work. This proposal is then illustrated with an example from English for Academic Legal Purposes.

I

There have been serious ESP textbooks for at least 15 years — at least since the publication of Herbert's *The Structure of Technical English* in 1965 — and during this period sales of ESP textbooks have been steady if not spectacular. However, I would like to claim that, despite this modest commercial success, ESP textbooks have been in many respects an educational failure. All too often they languish in their pristine laminate covers on staff-room shelves and in departmental book cupboards, whilst the ESP classes are offered combinations of duplicated sheets, authentic non-ESP materials from "the real world" and much-thumbed general ELT textbooks. From many parts of the world similar sequences of events recur and the story is essentially the same: "Yes, we were very interested when we read the advance publicity for this new ESP textbook, and we were impressed when we saw the inspection copy; we bought a number of class sets but we found it didn't go down very well with either the instructors or the students; we use our own materials now." Thus, those who have had some part to play in the organization of courses and the selection of textbooks would appear to have spent not so much wisely but rather too well. Depending on where we think the responsibility lies, ESP textbooks have either been over-bought or under-used.

One of the more curious aspects of this disturbing situation is that the locally produced materials which traditionally fill the gap left by the abandonment of the ESP textbook usually show a striking resemblance to the published materials that have been rejected. On one level, the local materials are often informed and influenced by whatever linguistic insights and enterprising exercise types the textbooks might contain; on another, it is by no means impossible to find examples of the "borrowing" of published material and of locally produced courses that are

*I would like to thank Jack Ewer of the University of Chile for valuable comments on an earlier version of this article. Any absurdities that remain are, of course, my own.

more edited anthologies of what is already available than assemblages of the new. Thus, for me, the ESP textbook problem is that textbooks have been rejected as complete courses — as usable packages as it were — however useful they may have proved for staff reference or as sources for occasional or organized photocopying.

If these observations have some resemblance to the realities of ESP work during the last ten years or so, then I think it is worth reflecting on how and why such a situation has arisen. I would like to begin my attempt at such a reflection with a medical analogy — if only to cast doubt on the obvious conclusion that the ESP textbook problem as defined here is simply a problem caused by the fact that the textbooks are not good enough.

It would not be difficult to imagine a situation in which the commercially available course of medication for selected groups of patients is being consistently rejected after very brief trials by the doctors as proving ineffective. Instead the doctors have turned to prescribing their own courses of medication. I would like to suggest that we could look for an explanation of this behaviour in three areas. First we could propose that the international drug companies have not yet — despite their claims — been able to produce effective medication for the particular condition concerned, either because their basic research has been inadequate, or because the condition they are attacking in fact varies slightly from one community to another, or because they have failed to appreciate the complexities involved in the application of their treatments (side-effects, the need for precise dosages, difficulties of administration, and so on). This type of explanation revolves around product failure, and would be equivalent to saying that the fault lies in the textbook. However, we could look for an explanation in another area by hypothesizing that the inadequacy lies with the doctors, who are either incapable of making a sufficiently precise diagnosis, or who are strongly prejudiced against any commercial products through bad past experiences, or through advanced training which has given them a certain level of pharmaceutical skill that they are determined to apply, so that they reject “off the shelf” medicines as a matter of principle, irrespective of the virtues of particular products. In this case we could conclude that the cause of the textbook failure lies principally with the administering ESP practitioners. Thirdly, we could claim that it is the patients who, although provided with qualified and understanding medical practitioners and correct medication, sabotage a favourable prognosis; for reasons of indolence, or suspicion, or distraction by other matters, they are unable to keep to the simple instructions that have been carefully explained to them. In this final case, we could conclude that the language learners themselves are at least partly to blame.

The third of these possibilities I do not wish to pursue in this article. However much it may apply to individual learners, to accept its general validity would be to question the rationale behind and value of institutionalized language instruction itself. Rather I want to concentrate on the first two. In the first place, even a brief acquaintance of ESP work in the last decade will give a relatively perceptive observer some sense of the strangely tense relationship that has existed and continues to exist — especially in the third world — between ESP practitioners and published materials. Further, in most language teaching situations, we look to course books to provide invaluable support for language teachers in their work, whereas in ESP the course book is seen rather more as an evil, perhaps necessary

at first, but to be dispensed with as soon as possible. I therefore think it would be opportune to consider the causes of this competitive strain, and for three main reasons: this professional tension has tended to make the ESP practitioner, even more than other educationists, a prisoner of his particular experiences, both successful and unsuccessful, and thus diminishes his capacity to evaluate materials objectively; secondly, a review of the causes of this professional tension may serve to reduce the unwarrantedly high level of duplication of effort currently observable in most corners of the globe; thirdly, it may follow from such a review that there emerges a case for re-assessing the role and value of published materials in ESP work and, concomitantly, for re-appraising the type of job specification drawn up for many ESP posts in the last few years. Of the numerous forces, fashions, research interests and speculations that make ESP what it is today I have singled out four as having a particularly strong influence on attitudes to published materials and so bearing on the ESP textbook problem: (a) market forces, (b) practitioner status, (c) textbook analysis, and (d) trends in research and development.

II

A. Published Materials and Market Forces in ESP Publishing

On a trivial level, it is likely that a practitioner's view of the potential contribution of published materials will be affected by his evaluation of the usefulness of the materials already available. If a practitioner has never found a textbook to his satisfaction, he may well be less than sanguine about future publications; if, on the other hand, he has been happy with a textbook then he might look forward to seeing an improved second edition as an even more effective replacement. However, ESP textbooks never do get revised — nor do they often receive serious reviews; and presumably these two phenomena are connected. I know of several substantial reviews of David Wilkins' *Notional Syllabuses* and of collections of ESP articles such as that edited by Ron Mackay and Alan Mountford, but I do not know of one serious appraisal of the notional scheme on which Longman's extensive *Nucleus* series is based. Now as Jack Ewer (personal communication) has pointed out, if there is no fully articulated challenge to the content in ESP textbooks, "there is no call to revise the textbook from the language angle, since nobody has queried that in the first place." The ESP textbook therefore stands or falls in terms of whether it is up-to-date in approach and methodology, at the present time how far it can attract such labels as communicative, functional, discursual, and dealing with study skills. In a situation where "latest is best" it is likely to be in the publisher's or writer's better interests to provide a brand-new product rather than attempt a major revision, however well-informed by classroom experience, of an existing course.

If the major educational publishing houses have deviated from their standard practices with regard to producing new editions of ESP textbooks, in many other respects they have not; despite the fact that ESP is necessarily a more specialized market than the larger area of English as a Foreign or Second Language, they have incorporated ESP within their larger strategy as far as book length, serialization, deregionalization, and format are concerned.

Book length. Inflation, accompanied by a sharper appreciation of "price

resistance levels”, has meant that ESP textbooks are becoming shorter. This in itself may not be a bad thing, but there is unfortunately little overt recognition that the textbooks are increasingly less self-sufficient in practice material and in coverage of skill areas; nor is there usually any specific guidance in the teacher’s notes of where and how these gaps may be filled. For instance, in the rightly admired volumes that have so far appeared under the general title of *Reading and Thinking in English* no provision has been made for vocabulary work of any kind. However, there can be little doubt that the educational success of this course will depend to a considerable extent on classes coming to the texts with an appropriate percentage range of lexical items unfamiliar to them. The course is therefore incomplete although not admitted to be so.

Serialization. Another way in which perceived market forces have influenced the published shape of ESP courses can be seen in the tendency to fit materials into a series such as the *Focus* series of Oxford University Press or the *Nucleus* volumes produced by Longman. Although there are probably no principled objections to this method of facilitating marketing, in terms of ESP practice it has proved to be not without its dangers. In the *Focus* series, for instance, it seems to have meant that the *Workshop Practice* volume is presented as being similar in cognitive level and type of analytic activity to the more academic science and engineering volumes. In *Nucleus* the rigorous application of an ordered set of notional/functional categories originally drawn up for *General Science* has led to some bizarre results. The material in the *Geology* volume is almost entirely restricted to the present tense (there are only four half pages illustrating the use of the past simple and no examples at all of the present perfect). It happens that geology (often interestingly glossed as “the history of the earth”) is a discipline which often uses present evidence to explain past geological events, and thus of all the sciences is the one with the greatest requirement for the perfective. Of course, it is possible to write an introductory English for Geology course so concentrating on crystallography and so on that the historical dimension is eliminated, but I very much doubt if anybody would naturally do so; it is the series design, the imposition of a pure science paradigm, that has produced an unjustifiable syllabus decision.

Deregionalization. Perhaps the majority of ESP textbooks are not written to order but are gestated in a particular educational environment, and therefore can be supposed to be most effective within the region from which they emanated in the sense that they will have attempted to cater for the cultural, academic, and linguistic characteristics of the original student body. It seems reasonable to predict that their viability will extend to the region but less reasonable to suppose that they will maintain their appropriateness on a global basis. For instance, it would seem that different percentages of vocabulary cognate with English (Horsella and Sindermann 1980) in Latin America and the Middle East would be crucial factors in designing reading materials. Nevertheless, market forces require publishers to produce international editions with a subsequent editing-out of much regionally useful material.

Format. The major publishers have been keen to keep to the format of the traditional small-paged bound book. The binding presents a problem to the instructor who — in his efforts to develop information-handling and oral-interaction skills — often wants the students or student groups to be faced with several pages at one

time. The small pages present another difficulty in that the original material very probably appeared in double-spaced typescript in which the spaces for missing words, etc. were of a suitable size for normal handwriting. However, the photoreduction processes of modern printing assume entirely hypocritically that the learner is suddenly capable of shrinking his handwriting to minuscule size to fit the shrunken blanks on the small printed page.

The publishers therefore have had considerable influence on ESP. The major ELT publishers often employ highly qualified ESP specialists who have done much to improve the details of the manuscripts they have accepted. However, in matters of substance, the publishers' concept of the textbook has contributed to the ESP textbook problem I have outlined here and can obscure thinking about potentially rather different roles for such books in the future.

B. The Status of the Practitioner

It is in this area that the ESP practitioners' objectivity and balance is particularly threatened, especially for those who have worked or wish to work in tertiary institutions. One of the more brutal aspects of ESP career structures has been that the more senior posts tend to be filled by those with advanced degrees in linguistics or those who have established a good track record in materials production. If one certain way up has been to get materials published, what does using a textbook profit a man if by using it he loses the prospect of advancement? Materials writing has tended to become the crucial section in interviews for ESP jobs and, as a result, a practitioner's view of his future tends to be made tranquil or nervous by the simple fact of whether he has or has not managed to demonstrate a capacity for materials writing. The interest in this question is obsessive and thereby relegates to the background many other applications of applied and sociolinguistics, many types of educational enquiry that need urgent attention. Further, in many cases this heavy commitment to materials writing has been intensified by the expectancies of the employing institutions, which increasingly require their English departments to write all their own courses. Thus, the pressures on service English, already pressurized by not offering degrees, to claim academic respectability by demonstrating profiles of materials supposedly tailor-made for the particular groups of students in its charge have become exceedingly powerful — so powerful that the purchase of textbooks for class use is seen to signal an academic retreat and one tinged with institutional dishonour. There are of course ESP situations for which no published courses are appropriate, and others where shortage of money, excusable ignorance of what is available, or administrative difficulties preclude importing materials from outside; however, there are others in which the ESP practitioner, because of status pressure, has had to turn a blind eye to the possibilities in external materials and embark upon the task of writing his own course.

C. Textbook Analysis

A third factor that can complicate thinking about the potential value of textbooks is provided by the typical course in textbook analysis and evaluation found on postgraduate and postexperience Diploma and MA Courses in Applied Linguistics. It is customary, I think, for such courses to proceed by establishing a

list of requirements that a textbook can be evaluated against, and as this list grows and develops into a comprehensive questionnaire it becomes more and more certain that the subject of the questionnaire will falter and fail. Consider, for instance, this small sample of the questions that Candlin and Breen (1979) would like to have asked of both published and unpublished teaching materials.

- a) Are the materials sensitive to the teacher-learner situation?
- b) Does the view of language implicit within the materials conflict with or complement that of the teacher?
- c) Is the language of materials derived from a sociolinguistic analysis of the target language repertoire?
- d) Are the learners' own specific interests and motivations accommodated?

These are interesting and hard questions indeed, and even in educational settings with which the practitioner may be very familiar his carefully honed materials may not score very high on such an inventory. Certainly, any materials imported into that educational setting will only serendipitously avoid recording a resounding series of negatives. If I am right in thinking that external materials — typically textbooks — will perform very badly under such an interrogation, then there must be doubt about the validity of using the same evaluative criteria for both published and unpublished materials, thus suggesting a need to explore a division of role for the two classes of product.

D. Trends in Research and Development

The fourth of the developments that I believe may (often for the best of reasons) have hindered unnecessarily the acceptance of ESP textbooks is a reflection of the types of investigation that are appreciated in ESP circles. In any research and development field there are areas of enquiry that at certain times are thought to be particularly exciting and fruitful of results, and it is on these "high-mileage" areas that interest becomes concentrated, because it is precisely in those areas that effort is rewarded and reputations quickly made; the "low-mileage" areas are those in temporary eclipse, with consequently fewer opportunities for those who venture into them. Thus, if we consider ELT and applied linguistics research, especially in Britain, over the last five years, I think we can see that ESP expertise has been rather narrowly defined.

The low-mileage areas have included the following:

Lexical and Syntactic Studies. The tradition of attempting to discover the linguistic facts in genres of the language has withered in Britain, however much it may flourish elsewhere.

Contrastive and Error Analysis. These traditional applied linguistics techniques have equally fallen out of favour, although the former may be reviving in new guise under some such label as "contrastive textology".

The Language Laboratory. The ESP movement, like many other sectors of foreign language teaching, has shown in recent years remarkably little interest in exploring new ways of utilizing this expensive piece of equipment.

In contrast, a number of high-mileage areas have emerged:

Reading. The interest in reading has concentrated, as a result of first-

language research, on the high-level macro-skills needed to interpret and respond to complex messages and often shows little tolerance of lexical unknowns and intrasentential complexities that can obstruct the comprehension of nonnative speakers.

Communicative Strategies. From discourse analysis, speech act theory, and ethnomethodology have come applications in the form of gambits, seminar strategies, the use of role plays and simulations, etc.

Needs Analysis. Especially since the publication of Munby's *Communicative Syllabus Design*.

Multi-Channel Activities. With the use of information transfer across the verbal/nonverbal divide as the predominant exercise type and with the use of closed circuit television and the videocassette recorder as the fashionable expensive equipment.

Thus, with regard to British ESP research and development, the second half of the seventies has seen a heavy concentration of effort and interest by those with influence on ESP development on *communicative* aspects of language rather than *linguistic* ones. Now I do not want to suggest that this change of emphasis has not been both salutary and valuable — only to claim for the purposes of the argument I am presenting here that one of its effects has been to reinforce tendencies already described to eliminate external materials from ESP curricula.

III

It therefore seems to me that several strands of contemporary thought and opinion have come together to establish a "rejectionist front" *vis-à-vis* the ESP textbook, partly because such books undermine the professionalism of the instructor and by extension that of his department, partly because they cannot meet the elaborated inventories of requirements produced by needs analysis or by schemes of evaluation, partly because they are offered in a format ostensibly unsuitable for communicative language teaching, and partly because their educational effectiveness may have been reduced by marketing considerations. The standard solution to these difficulties with published materials is for each institution, organization, or training establishment to offer its own tailor-made programmes. Much fine work has been done here and overall I would think the enhanced educational effectiveness of such programmes over their precursors is not seriously in doubt. What is in doubt is whether such programmes are cost-effective. The results of ESP programmes have not always matched up to the large sums of money spent on staffing and equipment and so on. Certainly, there is cause for concern here. There has been heavy duplication of much basic work, and certain types of insight have been painfully and independently gained in many an isolated institution. If, in addition, the publishers have good marketing reasons for becoming increasingly chary of accepting manuscripts emanating from minor ESP fields, then the exhausting and expensive material writing activities will become even more firmly locked into their local situations and so encourage recurring cycles of duplication and rediscovery. On a pragmatic level we seem to be in a state of crisis created by the rejection of outside materials in ESP projects and manifested by the escalation of costs incurred by a decision to undertake the gigantic task of establishing total self-sufficiency in teaching materials. Unless there is a solution to the ESP text-

book problem — and with it the ancillary problem of communication between ESP practitioners — we face an ever-growing danger of failing to deliver goods at the right time and at the right price. Thus, the present polarity of *Buy a course and be damned* or *Write a course and be praised* needs urgent reconsideration, and it is with ways of reaching a useful compromise between internal and external materials that the remainder of this article is concerned.

IV

As a first step, it would be useful to consider the potential virtues to be found in published materials. One such virtue is that they have a clearly discernible shape: a beginning, a middle and an end. One of the paradoxes of ESP in the seventies has been the laudable aim, on the one hand, to design the most useful courses possible for particular groups of customers whilst, on the other, the actuality of often denying to those customers opportunities to perceive the secrets of that design. Any sense of direction can be further obscured by the typical showers of single-page handouts to which the customers do not know how to respond: Do I keep these sheets or have I finished with them? Do I bring them next time? Are they prompts for activities or do I need to study them? Will I be tested on them later? Further, such materials allied with communicative methodology dually conspire to focus on classroom activities (of undoubtedly exciting kinds) rather than on the traditional and probably expected homework and out-of-class preparation. Thus, any consolidated course (inevitably a difficult and long-term objective in a local situation) can provide an over-all shape to the learning, which in turn creates predictability for the student and hence some assurance of where he is going, how far he has gone, and how far he has still to go. It also can allow him proper and regular opportunities for self-study. In my personal experience, albeit much of it in the Middle East, this “shape” advantage outweighs any putative loss of flexibility caused by being unable to develop a course *in medias res*. A further virtue is that textbooks tend to have a greater degree of internal coherence than duplicated courses, principally as a result of editorial concern to tie up the loose ends. Hence, it would appear that published material can provide a shape and an organization, both in itself and as perceived by the participants, that is not easily equalled in a local situation.

However, at this point it is essential to recognise that the types of course organization available to a writer aiming for a large and largely unknown usership are much more restricted than one writing within his employing institution. Materials that are content-based (professionally, academically, or vocationally) are not really a feasible proposition for a generalized course, however attractive they might seem *in situ*. For example, the way first year architectural studies are taught round the world is subject to a great deal of variation in such things as the differing emphases given to the history of the subject, fine art, engineering and mathematics, optics, and the environment, etc., so that there is no way in which outside materials could reasonably hope to “shadow” the content. In a similar way business meetings, or for that matter history lessons, are so often influenced by national and cultural, professional factors that commercially produced courses articulated around mimicry of their structure and content will crash-land if launched beyond the circumstances for which they were originally designed. A highly elaborate communicative articulation to a course also presents severe prob-

lems if proffered for general use, because such courses make assumptions about technical equipment, the availability of realia, class size, learning styles, and educational expectations that equally do not allow them to travel well when moved away from the base institution within which they were created.

Thus, it seems to me that the ESP materials writer who has a textbook in mind needs to find for his organizational frame something that is relatively stable and something that is relatively universal, and I would suggest that the most obvious place to find this is in the English language itself, particularly in the more formal written language. Such a restriction to a broadly linguistic design now opens the way to assigning a diminished but proper place for external materials in ESP schemes of things. We can see the textbook as providing a grammatical/lexical/functional continuum operating in conjunction with other continua provided by local inputs.

However, if we accept this integrative rather than exclusive role, the criteria by which we should evaluate such textbooks change. In the first place, we will require that they are based on more thorough research than is presently the case, for their principal objective is to capture the lexical and syntactic indexical features of disciplines and subdisciplines and relate these to cognitive structure and typical procedures and operational activities, and it is these insights that hard-pressed individuals in the field cannot easily achieve.

The second requirement is that this material is made accessible to the learner in such a way that he can use the book with profit and advantage for private study, as a reference resource when dealing with other material, and as a vehicle for checking particular points. In this role, the new ESP textbook will be more similar to standard textbooks in other subjects than to available ESP textbooks themselves.

The third but most important requirement would be that the external materials would not be hermetic, but would be designed in such a way that local inputs would not only be encouraged but would also be essential. The teacher's manual would give considerable but diplomatic help with this so that the tension between textbook and practitioner is reduced. In such a scheme the practitioner is no longer required to produce a whole course. In this way he can spend time on other and neglected matters such as investigating the learning styles of his students, carrying out methodological experiments, and conducting contrastive and error analysis within a framework of investigating second language acquisition, whilst on the other hand he is required to produce a sizeable proportion of the course in such a way that his practitioner status is not unduly threatened.

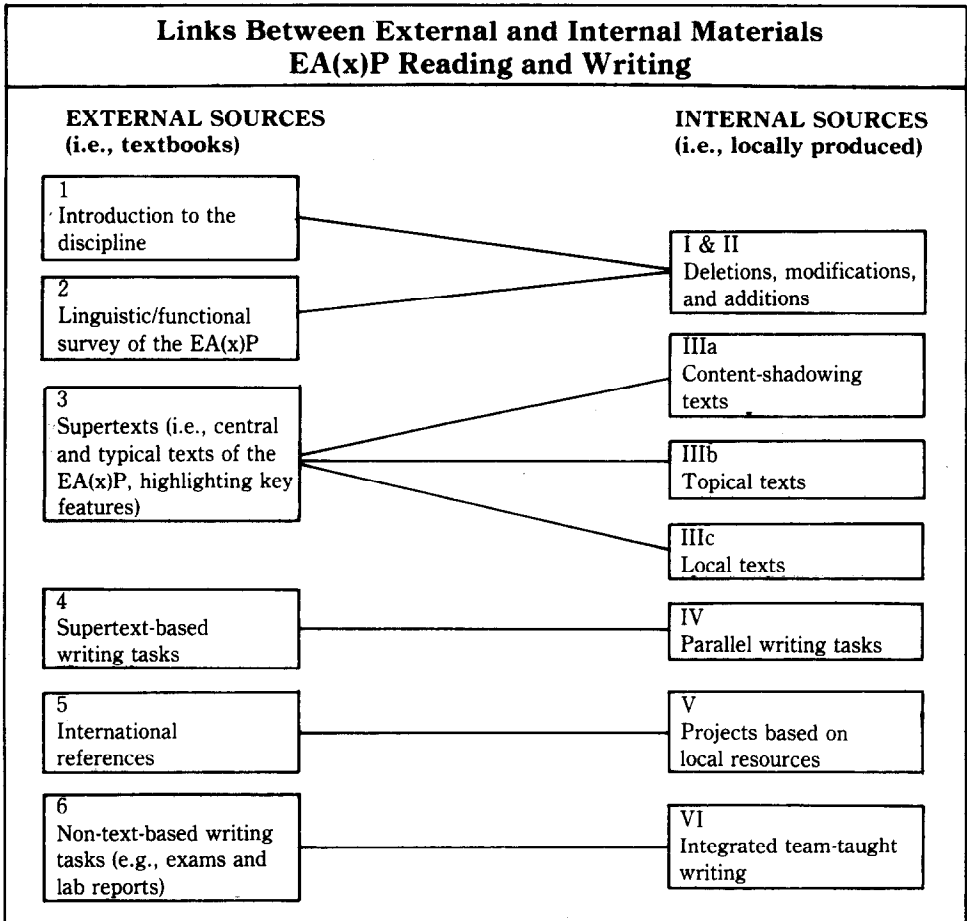
The fourth requirement is that the presentation of the material should be sufficiently eclectic to cater for a sizeable and heterogeneous usership and should be handled in such a way that the various approaches to explanation, exemplification, and practice allow at least some possibility for the learner to have selected or to self-select routes through the course that fit his or her individual circumstances.

V

I have in the previous section offered a generalized and speculative solution to the ESP textbook problem by showing how one can conceive of different roles

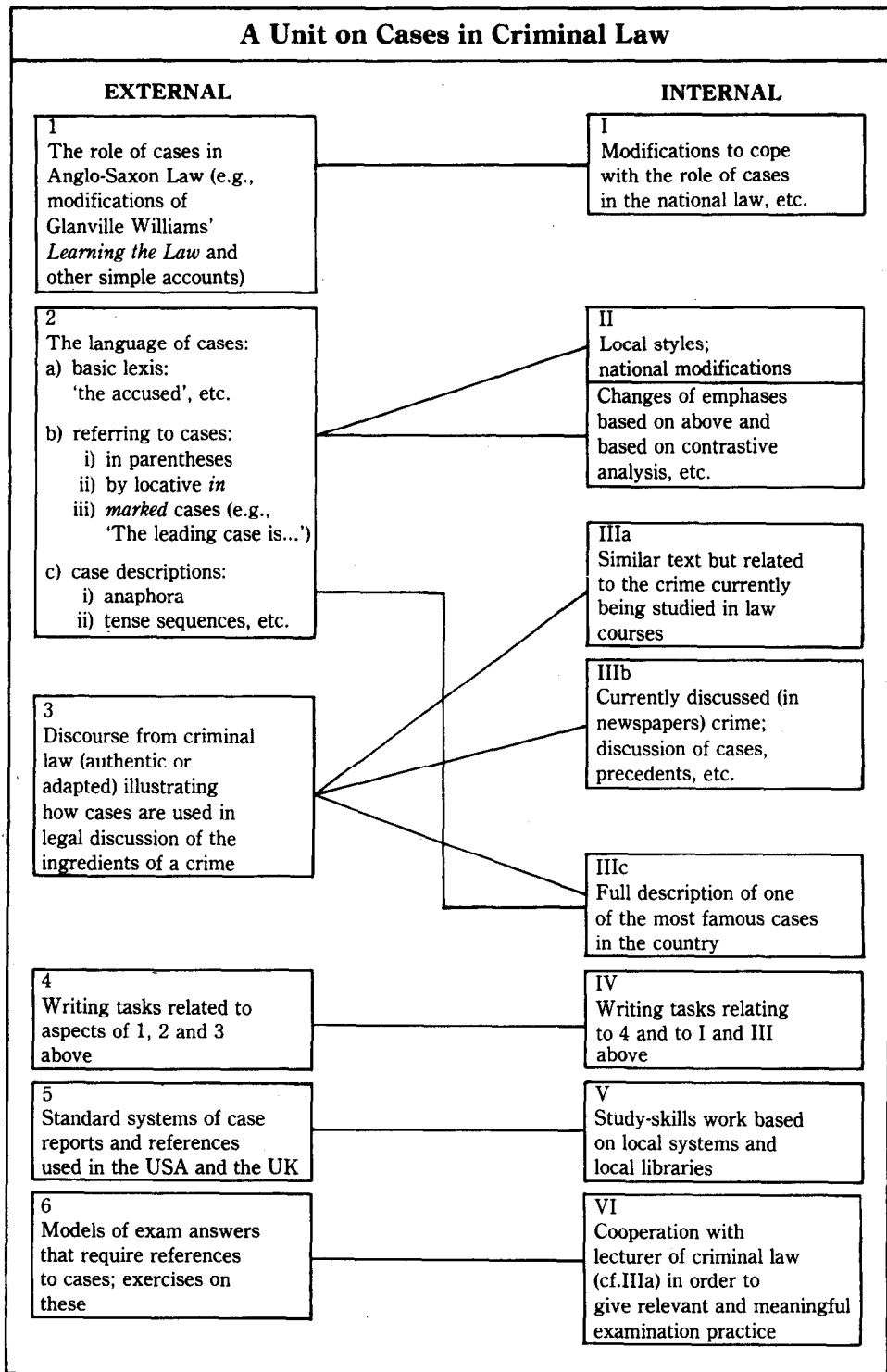
(and different evaluative criteria) for external and internal materials and thereby how these two inputs can be brought together in a supportive rather than competitive way. I would now like to indicate how such links could be worked out in practice, first in terms of a general framework for any discipline-specific English for Academic Purposes course (EA(x)P) and then for the case of English for Academic Legal Purposes. In both illustrations I have restricted myself to reading and writing and have assumed that the institutions for which the courses are to be designed are predominantly English-medium.

FIGURE 1



At the outset a number of general observations should be made about the above figure. First, it aims to represent only one of several possible link-arrangements. Second, the boxed items refer to resource inputs and do not in any sense represent teaching units; in fact, in any one substantial course unit some contribution might be made by material from all of the thirteen boxes. Thirdly, it should be noted that the lines linking the left- and right-hand boxes are not specified for direction. This is because there is a hope that a service English department that purchases sets of the type of "unfinished" textbook proposed here will enter into a relationship with the author/publisher so that feedback can be established and

FIGURE 2



hence lead either to revised versions of the skeletal core or, more interestingly, to the production of a full regional or national text.

I have chosen to illustrate the general framework with a sample unit for a law course, partly because English for Academic Legal Purposes well represents areas of insufficiently large market potential to attract a publisher, and partly because law is not a "universal" subject like physics but varies from culture to culture and from nation to nation. The area I have selected is cases in criminal law if only because I have some familiarity with it (Swales: forthcoming).

VI

In this article I have attempted to sketch one type of solution to the problems caused by isolationist tendencies in ESP work and, in particular, by the siege mentality that so often and so unnecessarily encircles ESP projects. To those who would claim that the revised functions and forms of ESP textbooks discussed here are unrealistic because they will prove unacceptable to publishers, I would reply that just as particular institutions have launched the current and growing stock of ESP periodicals, so such or similar institutions and organizations are probably capable of producing the sort of "half-courses" I have in mind. To those who would claim that I have offered no real solution to the problem of practitioner status, I would agree that in some of the circumstances in which native speakers are employed this may be so. However, I would also observe that the full cost of placing an ESP specialist in a key post in the Third World is now at least 50,000 dollars per year and that at this price there is no justification in having a job specification for such a specialist which involves duplicating work that has already been done.

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John Swales is Senior Lecturer and Head of the EFL Section, Language Studies Unit, University of Aston in Birmingham, and has held various teaching and administrative positions in England, Italy, Sweden, Libya, and the Sudan. His previous post was Director, English Language Servicing Unit, University of Khartoum, 1973-78. An editorial advisor on ESP to Thomas Nelson and Sons, he is the author of *Writing Scientific English* (1971) and co-author of *English in the Medical Laboratory* (1980). He has published several articles on ESP and related fields and is founder and former editor of *ESPMENA Bulletin*.