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A Passage in Time

In *Special-purpose language learning: A perspective*, Peter Strevens made a comparatively early attempt to define and describe special-purpose language teaching and, specifically, the particular place of ESP within it (1977, Volume 10, 145–163). In the extract below he tackles the problem of defining the boundaries between 'general' and 'special purpose' courses and defends the need for a wider choice of special-purposes courses in a range of L2s.

> Special-purpose language teaching (SP-LT) occurs whenever the content and aims of the teaching are determined by the requirements of the learner rather than by external factors such as general educational criteria. Three practical difficulties impede our attempts to produce a definition of SP-LT. These are: (i) the difficulty of drawing the line between 'general' and 'special' purposes; (ii) the effect upon this problem of the great extension of the range of courses to which the label has in recent years been applied; (iii) the element of fashion, which tempts course organisers or textbook writers to attach the label of 'special purposes' to courses with little or no justification for doing so. . .
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> This first difficulty is not easy to overcome. One expression of it is the defence, by upholders of conventional 'general' teaching of languages against what they feel to be a threat to humanistic and literary values, that 'general' language courses are themselves really 'special-purpose' courses: they could be re-titled (it is claimed in this defence) 'French for the special purposes of general education'; at a higher level, 'French for literary criticism', and similarly for other languages incorporated in general school education. Beneath the surface of this claim can be discerned the massive issues that currently preoccupy the modern language profession: the need to provide a fresh, modern and publicly-acceptable justification for school language courses; reaction to the unexpected difficulties encountered in changing from being a subject taught only to academic-stream pupils to a subject taught across the full range of abilities; in Britain at least, confusion over the mixed results – some highly successful, some disastrous – of introducing French in the primary school; dismay at the trend among adolescents towards the view that 'modern languages are for girls'; a feeling of betrayal at the diminution of public belief that the study of foreign literature provides even an obvious and desirable goal for the young, let alone a satisfying career; perhaps envy of their colleagues in the teaching of English as a foreign language, partly because of the sheer popularity of, and demand for, English at a time when demand for French, Russian, Spanish, etc., has diminished, perhaps even more because of the rapid growth of 'professionalisation' in TEFL (in the sense of more rigorous and specialised initial training and the greater expectation of further, in-service, training to higher degree level); and other concerns. . .
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> The notion of special-purpose teaching frequently arouses these anxieties, and some teachers of modern languages at school level focus their emotional response to these issues into a denunciation of SP-LT for not being a continuation of the great humanistic educational tradition, for whose maintenance they were originally trained. Within the modern languages profession the current reappraisal of its role and discussion of its basic problems will doubtless resolve these difficulties, given the fundamental intellectual strength that lies behind it; in so doing it may perhaps lead to the development of a wide range of special-purpose courses in French, German, etc., instead of leaving English as the only language to have made serious strides in this direction.

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