

THE CONCEPT OF ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES AS AN APPROACH TO LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Abstract: The period following the Second World War has brought immense changes on the economic, political and social levels. The ever-growing levels of globalization, tremendous and continuous progress in science and technology, the development of the world's economy and internalization of higher education have resulted in people's increased awareness of the importance of successful cross-cultural communication and collaboration as major components of workplace dynamics in a globalized world. Thus the knowledge of English, a global *lingua franca*, has opened new perspectives for mobility and cooperation in all spheres of human activity. Countries worldwide have recognized the importance of the English language and included it in the curricula at all levels of education. Due to the fact that each profession has its own context, terminology and the manner in which it communicates its ideas, General English courses have frequently failed to respond to learners' or employers' needs. The recognized demand for teaching and learning English tailored to the specific needs of learners' instead of traditionally focusing on teaching language forms, has led to the emergence of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), an approach to language teaching related to the specific purpose for learning English and addressing learners ever growing needs and requirements resulting from labor market demands, and its separation from the concept of General English. Since the 1960s, ESP has grown to become one of the most prominent areas of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching. Its significance is reflected in an increasing number of universities worldwide including ESP as a compulsory subject in their bachelor degree programs in different fields in order to meet their students' future career needs. The aim of this paper is to highlight the importance of ESP on a global level and analyze its major aspects – its historical background, the theories that define it, the types of ESP, the characteristics that distinguish it from English for General Purposes (EGP), as well as to consider some of the methodological implications for language teachers.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes, ESP definitions, types of ESP, characteristics, methodology.

1. INTRODUCTION

Tremendous progress in science and technology, the development of the world's economy and increased mobility of workforce, as well as internalization of higher education in the last few decades have highlighted the importance of effective cross-border and cross-cultural communication and, consequently, the need for a shared language for speakers of different native languages. Based on geographical-historical and socio-cultural factors, the English language has developed a special role recognized in every country, ensuring communication between people worldwide (Crystal, 2003, pp. 29, 11). It has taken precedence over all other languages and become the *lingua franca* of the modern age international communication as well as a key factor of globalization (Lukač-Zoranić, 2013, p. 168).

Nowadays, English occupies a unique place and is the most widely used language in almost all the fields such as international trade, business, diplomacy, science, technology, medicine, education, scientific research, tourism and mass entertainment. It has become an essential tool for students who want to pursue undergraduate or graduate studies abroad, or participate in student mobility programs, as well for those who want to pursue careers in multinational companies. It is also a dominant language of international science and scientific journalism, which heavily depends on English-only sources (Nguyen & Tran, 2019), as around 80% of all journals indexed in SCOPUS are published in English (Van Weijen, 2012, p. 7) and 98% of publications in the area of natural and basic sciences are written in English (Ramirez-Castañeda, 2020, p. 1). In addition, there is no hesitation to claim that English is the most commonly used language on the Internet, being used by 60.2% of all the websites (Web Technology Surveys, 2022).

Moreover, as a result of increased mobility of workforce, English has become an indispensable business tool. A 2012 survey by the Economist Intelligence Unit showed that English language proficiency is believed not only to improve career prospects on the labor market and lead to increased cross-border mobility of workforce, but also to have a beneficial impact on financial indicators such as profit, revenue and market share (Bolchover, 2012).

As each profession has its own context, terminology and the manner in which it communicates its ideas, the demand for teaching and learning English tailored to learners' specific academic or professional needs, instead of traditionally focusing on teaching language forms, has led to the emergence of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), a form of language teaching related to the "specific purpose" for learning English (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p.

18), and its separation from the concept of English for General Purposes (EGP). Although ESP emerged in the 1960s, its role in the 21st century characterized by rapid development of science and technology is becoming even more significant (Williams, 2014).

2. SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) identified three key factors that led to the development of ESP and considerable attention given to this approach: the demands of the world in the second half of the 20th century, a revolution in linguistics, and new developments in educational psychology (p. 6–8). First, the rapid specialization in the professional world during the 1960s resulted in more specific human activities and communicative needs, which created a new generation of learners who knew why exactly they needed to learn the language. Second, the new studies in linguistics shifted attention from defining the formal features of language usage to focusing primarily on how the language is used in real communication in different domains such as, for example, commerce or engineering. Finally, the new developments in educational psychology emphasized the central importance of the learners in teaching practices and recognized the influence of learners' needs and interests on their motivation and effectiveness of learning (pp. 14–16). Consequently, ESP as a new approach to language instruction evolved in response to these new developments and changes.

These developments have caused changes in the teaching of English, especially with the inclusion of ESP in the curricula in both secondary vocational schools and higher education institutions and the adoption of learner-centered approach. The emergence of the ESP concept has not only set a new goal of teaching but also led to the reorganization of the entire teaching process, in terms of the introduction of new teaching methods and methodological concepts, all in accordance with learners' needs and reasons for learning English as well as the context of the given profession.

Today we can witness that demand for English for Specific Purposes continues to increase and expand throughout the world, as learners need courses matching their ever growing needs and requirements resulting from the labor market demands. Over the last twenty years the ESP field has developed dramatically, which is reflected by a growing number of studies conducted in this field worldwide. This increased interest in ESP related topics demonstrates the growing acceptance of ESP as an academic discipline (Ramírez, 2015, p. 382).

3. WHAT IS ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES (ESP)?

It is quite difficult to provide an accurate and clear-cut definition of ESP. As a result, different definitions have been given by various authors since ESP appeared. According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), the essence of ESP is the purpose of learning English, and they define it as “an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner's reason for learning” (p. 21). Therefore learners and their needs are regarded as central to an ESP course design (p. 54). This brought about a real revolution in language teaching – from a teacher-centered to a learner-centered approach (Jendrych, 2013, p. 44).

The definition of ESP put forward by Strevens (1988, as cited in Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998, p. 3) makes a distinction between absolute and variable characteristics of ESP. As for absolute characteristics, the author points out that ESP consist of English language teaching which is: a) designed to meet the specified needs of the learner; b) related in content to particular disciplines, occupations and activities; c) centered on the language appropriate to those activities; and d) in contrast with General English. As for variable characteristics, ESP may: a) be restricted to particular language skills to be learned; b) not follow any methodology set in advance. Essentially, this definition emphasizes that ESP courses should concentrate on topics and language which belong to particular disciplines or occupations in order to meet learners' specific needs.

The primacy of learners' needs is also recognized by Robinson (1991), who defines ESP on the basis of two criteria essential for ESP courses. First, ESP is normally goal-directed, as learners need to study English for study and work purposes, and not because they are interested in studying the language as such. Second, the basis for developing ESP courses is a needs analysis, which aims to specify what exactly students have to do through the medium of English. Additionally, this author points out that ESP courses are constrained by a limited time period in which their objectives have to be achieved, and they are taught mostly to adults, either tertiary education students of experienced members of the workforce, although it could also be taught in a secondary vocational school setting. Furthermore, except in certain specific circumstances, ESP courses are not generally designed for beginner level students.

Probably the most comprehensive definition has been offered by Dudley-Evans and St John (1998, pp. 4–5). Their definition is clearly influenced by that of Strevens (1988), although they have removed the absolute characteristic that “ESP is in contrast with General English” and added more variable characteristics. As for absolute characteristics, they also acknowledge that ESP is meant to: a) address learners' specific needs; b) use the methodology and activities of the discipline it serves; and c) focus on the language, skills, discourse and genre

appropriate to these activities. Variable characteristics are more detailed than those recognized by Strevens. Namely, ESP: a) may be related to or designed for specific disciplines, and b) may use a different methodology from that of General English. As for ESP learners and the assumed level of language proficiency, their definition echoes the characteristics of ESP defined by Robinson (1991) in that c) ESP courses are likely to be designed for adult learners, although they could also be used for learners at secondary school level, and they are d) generally designed for intermediate or advanced students because e) most ESP courses assume basic knowledge of the language system. This implies that, as in Robinson, in some specific situations ESP courses can also be used with the beginners.

Some other authors have also emphasized the importance of learners' specific language use needs as the focal point of ESP. Referring to ESP learners in their definitions, they adhere to the views expressed by Dudley-Evans and St John as well as Robinson, and point out that ESP learners are mostly adults whose needs are identified within academic, occupational or professional fields, and who require ESP courses to prepare themselves for effective communication in situations which occur, or will occur, in their professional work or studies (Basturkmen, 2006; Fiorito, 2005, as cited in Javid, 2013; Paltridge & Starfield, 2013; Voyakina & Korolyova, 2014).

4. CLASSIFICATION OF ESP

Carver (1983) distinguishes three varieties of ESP: English as a restricted language (a specific language required and used by specific professions, such as waiters, air-traffic controllers, electricians, etc.), English for academic or occupational purposes, which responds to learners' specific needs defined by their specific academic disciplines or professions, and English with specific topics, which refers to teaching the language to university students or employed professionals where a special emphasis is put on particular vocabulary and skills they need to develop to effectively cope with the tasks and requirements of their academic or professional contexts – to read the literature of their subject, attend conferences, participate in meetings and negotiations, deliver presentations, etc.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) divide EPS courses into three branches in accordance with the general nature of the learners' specialism: English for Science and Technology (EST), English for Business and Economics (EBE), and English for Social Sciences (ESS). Each of these varieties is further subdivided into two types – English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) – depending on whether the learner needs English for academic studies, or for work or training. The topmost branches of their famous "Tree of ELT" (p. 17) represent individual ESP courses such as English for Medical Studies, English for Technicians, English for Economics, English for Secretaries, English for Psychology, etc.

Nowadays, ESP is an umbrella term which includes a large number of varieties. Publishers not only offer course books and accompanying online materials, as well as teaching and learning resources, for different varieties of ESP but also publish course books and materials aimed at specific professions, such as English for flight attendants, travel agents, secretaries, nurses, paramedics, firefighters, hairdressers, kindergarten teachers, security personnel, taxi drivers, electricians, and so on. This variety and proliferation of course books on offer demonstrates the popularity and expansion of ESP as well as a huge demand for highly specialized language courses.

5. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ESP AND ENGLISH FOR GENERAL PURPOSES (EGP)

Based on the presented definitions of ESP, several important distinctions can be made between ESP and English for General Purposes (EGP), a type of language which is "context-independent" (Carver, 1983, p. 132) or related to "teaching English for no obvious reason" (Abbot, 1981, as cited in Jordan, 1997, p. 4). The major difference between ESP and EGP lies in the learners and their purpose of learning the language. EGP learners have no easily recognizable reason (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p. 53). The teaching and learning of EGP has primarily an educational function, the goal of which is the development of general language competences. Thus, EGP learners are either interested in studying the language as such in order to acquire or expand their general knowledge, or they study it to fulfill the school curriculum requirement. On the other hand, ESP courses are goal-directed and aim at meeting learners' needs to operate successfully in a specific context, i.e. in specific academic, workplace, or professional environments.

This fundamental difference between ESP and EGP has also been recognized by Widdowson (1983). In his view, GPE is no less purposeful than ESP, but they differ in the way in which the purpose is defined. In ESP, the purpose refers to the practical use of language in occupational or academic settings. Therefore the focus is on training and learners are provided with restricted competences they need to cope with clearly defined tasks. On the other hand, as there are no definite aims which can determine course design, the purpose in GPE is related to developing a general capacity for language use that will enable learners to cope with undefined situations in the future. Unlike ESP, which is based on learners immediate or near future language needs, in GPE, which has an exclusively educational function, there is an abstract projection of aims, while the actual use of language is commonly "a vague and distant prospect" (p. 6).

In a similar vein, Basturkmen (2006) states that a key feature of ESP course design is the syllabus based on learners' needs analysis, and points out that ESP leads learners "to a known destination" in the most time-efficient manner in order to ensure achieving specific goals, while EGP language teaching "moves from a specified point to an often indeterminate destination" (p. 9).

Despite the obvious difference between ESP and EGP in terms of purpose, learning goals and competences they develop, ESP teachers have a lot in common with EGP teachers. They both have to consider linguistic development and foreign language teaching theories in order to make learning less time-consuming and more efficient (Bojović, 2006; Su, 2021). They both also need to be aware of and keep up with the current trends in education in general and English teaching in particular. It is becoming increasingly important for both to be prepared to use new technologies, which increase student engagement and focus by encouraging more authentic and realistic communication (Altun & Ahmad, 2021), and combine them with more traditional forms of teaching in order to improve their teaching methodology and ensure more efficient language learning. However, what differentiates ESP teachers from EGP teachers is the necessity to understand and adapt to the requirements of other professions. Unlike the EGP teacher, the ESP teacher is not the "primary knower" of the content of students' specialist disciplines (Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998, p. 13) and transmitter of knowledge. ESP learners usually know more about the subject matter and their particular discipline or profession than the teacher. Therefore ESP teachers should gain some expert knowledge of the field their specific ESP course is related to (Thi & Duyen, 2015), which is not the requirement that EGP teachers need to fulfill.

ESP teachers

The role of ESP teachers is rather complex. They are not only expected to be language experts but they also require some additional knowledge and skills to effectively fulfill their role. The language competences themselves may present an obstacle to ESP teachers (Robinson, 1991, p. 79), as they are normally, during their teacher training program at university, not trained to teach English of the academic disciplines or professions their learners are studying or working in. Therefore, they are required to familiarize themselves with particular disciplines or professions their ESP courses are related to. This, however, does not mean that they have to obtain the specialist knowledge of the subject matter and become experts in marketing, finance or engineering, but certain familiarity with the discipline and understanding of practices and problems faced by specific professions is required in order to successfully deliver specific ESP courses tailored to their learners' needs. In order to achieve this, ESP teachers need to devote time and effort to self-study, to show flexibility and be willing to collaborate with learners, more experienced colleagues, and subject matter teachers from other departments (Bojović, 2006; Bracaj, 2014; Thi & Duyen, 2015). Additionally, they need to be able to identify learners' needs and design suitable courses that will address these specific needs. Therefore the knowledge of "needs analysis, syllabus design, material writing or adaptation and evaluation" is also important for ESP teachers (Duyen, 2014, p. 229).

In order to emphasize that ESP involves many more responsibilities besides teaching, Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) refer to them as "practitioners" rather than "teachers" (p. 13). In their view, ESP practitioners have to perform the roles of: 1) a teacher, 2) a course designer and materials provider, 3) a collaborator, 4) a researcher, and 5) an evaluator.

The first role, that of a teacher, is shared with GPE teachers, the most important objective of which is helping learners to learn the language in a positive learning environment. However, as ESP learners are commonly more familiar with the specialized content of materials or work they are engaged in than the teacher, ESP teachers should establish a kind of partnership with their learners in which they need to show considerable flexibility and be prepared not only to collaborate with learners but also to learn from them.

Besides planning and designing courses based on learners' need analysis, in many cases ESP teachers have to provide course material by selecting suitable published material, adapting or even writing it in order to meet learners' identified needs.

The role of collaborator is another essential role implying drawing on learners' knowledge in order to create genuine communicative situations in the classroom, as well as working closely with other more experienced ESP teachers, subject matter teachers from other departments or experts in particular fields.

The role of researcher requires the ability to research learners' needs by conducting a "target situation analysis" (TSA), which focuses on learners' needs at the end of a language course, as well as a "present situation analysis" (PSA) determining learners' strengths and weaknesses at the beginning of a course, and to analyze the language and skills needed to carry out specific jobs (Robinson, 1991, pp. 8–10). The findings of these analyses should be incorporated into the course and materials selection and/or design.

Finally, the role of an evaluator implies testing of students and evaluation of courses and teaching materials. The results and findings of this evaluation provide valuable information and can be used to adapt and improve the course syllabus.

6. CHARACTERISTICS OF ESP COURSES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

Carver (1983) identifies three characteristics common to ESP courses: a) authentic material, b) purpose-related orientation, and c) self-direction.

As ESP learners learn the language in order to be able to engage in purposeful and meaningful real-world communicative situations occurring within their workplace environments, the use of authentic material is one of the crucial features of ESP courses, as it exposes them to real language as used in such situations and environments. Given the fact that ESP courses are generally intended for intermediate or advanced learners, exposure to authentic material, modified by the teacher or unmodified, is not only possible and recommendable in these courses but “should be as extensive as possible, and should occur as early as possible (Carver, 1983, p. 133). This material may include, for instance, books, scientific journals, graphs, charts, instruction manuals, job advertisements, invoices, order forms, business reports, authentic business correspondence, as well as a variety of resources available on the Internet such as company websites, videos, blogs, podcasts, etc. The use of authentic materials can produce a sense of achievement, enjoyment, satisfaction and autonomy in learners (Ayuningtyas, 2017, p. 108) and therefore bringing authentic materials into the ESP classroom is believed to be motivating, as they add real-life element to learning experience (Nădrag & Buzarna-Tihenea, 2017, p. 141) and enhance the connection between the ESP classroom and the world of work.

Purpose-related orientation of ESP courses has been identified as the simulation of various communicative tasks to prepare learners for different target situations (Carver, 1983, p. 134). These tasks may take form of role play and simulation of telephone conversations, business meetings, negotiating with clients, welcoming and socializing with visitors, exchanging contact details, presenting a company or a particular product or service, making and dealing with complaints, presenting visual information, discussing and solving problems, giving a research report, etc. These simulations provide a lot of opportunities for learners to engage in purposeful communication and to apply and improve the language skills acquired in the ESP classroom.

The third feature, self-direction, is concerned with “turning learners into users” and encouraging them to have a certain degree of autonomy or freedom “to decide when, what, and how they will study” (pp. 134–135). Learner autonomy is especially important outside the ESP classroom where learners need to set their own learning goals and plan practice opportunities without the help of the teacher. For this reason, teachers should act as facilitators who guide learners to become more autonomous by taking more responsibility for their learning. This can be achieved by helping them to understand learning strategies and plan their learning, and by making them aware of learning resources.

Based on the presented characteristics of ESP courses and the fact that these courses should normally be “goal-directed” (Robinson, 1991, p. 2), as their purpose is to “enable learners to function adequately in a target situation” (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p. 12), several recommendations for teaching ESP could be made:

- learners’ needs analysis should be the starting point in ESP course and syllabus design;
- as learners commonly know more about the subject matter or their particular professions, as well as the situations requiring effective communication in English in their workplace environments, the syllabus could be negotiated between teachers and learners;
- teachers have to show flexibility and be prepared to collaborate with learners, their colleagues from other departments and experts in the field that their ESP course is related to;
- the inclusion of various authentic materials should be as extensive as possible, especially at intermediate or higher levels, and based on learners’ reasons for learning;
- authentic material should be up-to-date and relevant for learners’ specializations or professions;
- simulations of real-life communicative situations should be given priority in order to ensure meaningful and purposeful communication;
- teachers should guide learners to become more autonomous and take more responsibility for their learning.

7. CONCLUSION

English for Specific Purposes has grown to become one of the most prominent areas of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teaching. The focal point of ESP is learners’ specific language use needs defined by their particular academic disciplines or occupations. They study ESP not in order to develop or improve general language competences but in order to effectively engage in real-life work-related communicative situations on a global level, which can improve their career or promotion prospects in a globalized world we live in. The language teaching in the ESP classroom, therefore, has to be adjusted to the specific linguistic and communicative needs of particular learners. As a result, learning outcomes of ESP are always practical. ESP courses are designed by combining the subject matter, vocabulary and structures related to a particular discipline or profession, and by creating a balance between educational theory and practical considerations. This combination has been found to be highly motivating

for learners, who recognize the obvious relevance of what they are studying and are able to apply what they are learning or have learnt to communicative situations in their workplace environments. On the other hand, designing and teaching ESP courses can be rather challenging for language teachers, as they have to become familiar with academic disciplines or professions their particular ESP courses are related to and to take on several different roles besides that of a teacher. This requires a lot of time, effort and research, as well as close collaboration with learners, other more experienced ESP teachers and subject-matter teachers from other departments and even field experts. Nevertheless, the significance of ESP is widely recognized nowadays, as an increasing number of universities worldwide including ESP as a compulsory subject in their bachelor and even master degree programs in different fields in order to address the global labor market requirements and meet students' future career needs.

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