

What's so Specific about ESP?

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Introduction

This article aims to provide an overview of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and to distinguish this area of English language teaching from general English teaching. It will also aim to highlight the various distinctions within ESP. It is hoped that highlighting these distinctions will assist in assessing student needs and in choosing appropriate materials and activities to meet these needs.

What is ESP?

Writers on ESP have offered a number of defining characteristics meant to distinguish this area of language teaching from general English teaching. Fanning (1990), for example, follows Robinson's claims that "ESP should be goal-directed and secondly that it be based on needs analysis" (p. 159). Hutchinson and Waters (1987) think that "ESP should be properly seen not as any particular language produced but as an approach to language teaching which is directed by specific and apparent reasons for learning" (p. 19). The specific needs of the learner are again emphasised by Dudley-Evans and St John (1998). They also add the additional requirement that ESP should "make use of the underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves" (p. 4). All these definitions share broadly similar conceptions, and may be summed up in the four characteristics presented by Johns and Price-Machado (2001, p. 44).

They list the "absolute characteristics" of ESP as being:

- *designed to meet the specified needs of the learner*
- *related to content (i.e. in the themes and topics) to particular disciplines, occupations or activities*
- *centred on the language appropriate to*

these activities in syntax, lexis, discourse semantics, and the analysis of discourse

- *in contrast to 'General English'*

These characteristics aim to provide a descriptive outline by which we can recognise particular examples of ESP practice. A consideration of these points is therefore a necessary first step in the design of ESP syllabi, courses and lessons. If the proposed course does not display these characteristics, then it is fair to question whether it is an ESP course at all.

What is so specific about ESP?

A focus on student needs is often cited as the feature that contrasts ESP with general English. General English is often associated with the broad aim of improving students' language ability. This view can be treated dismissively in ESP. For example, Jordan (1997) describes general English teaching as "TENOR 'the teaching of language for no obvious reason', no reason obvious to the learner that is" (p. 4). So what is different about ESP?

The pre-occupying focus of ESP can be described as defining and meeting students' needs (Johns & Dudley-Evans, 1991, p. 299). This concentration on needs is centred in two broad areas. These are English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP). These broad categories are divided again to meet the further varying needs of learners. For example, within EAP, there are the areas of English for Science and Technology (EST), for Business and Economics (EBE), for Medical Purposes (EMP), and for Law (ELP). These more specifically defined areas are known as English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP). Each of these courses would be designed to assist the learner with the language and skills necessary for successful study within these disciplines, dealing not only with the vocabulary and structures commonly found within each area, but also with the

conventions for presenting written and oral academic work.

A similar range of divisions has developed to assist employees or those about to be employed within a particular sector to develop the language and skills necessary to conduct their work. The divisions may be the same, such as English for Medical Purposes or English for Business Purposes, but the learner's needs will be different from those seeking the successful completion of a course of study in English at college or university. With English for Specific Occupational Purposes (ESOP), the focus will be much more on the needs of the learner within his or her everyday work situation. Within the English for Business Purposes division, this might include work on the language and skills required to participate in meetings, or in negotiations, or in simply how to deal with general telephone enquiries. In fact, it is possible to focus courses and lessons within both EAP and EOP into ever narrowing points of specificity. For example, it is quite possible for an EAP teacher to assist one particular student prepare for the presentation of a particular paper at one specific conference. This idea is expressed more graphically in Dudley-Evans and St John's (1998) idea of a continuum of English language teaching (Figure 1).

On this conception, ELT has five degrees of specificity, starting with general English for beginners and moving on to intermediate and advanced courses. After that they place general

English for academic/business purposes. The courses at this point in the continuum would focus on general "core language and skills" required for academic study or business communication. The next point on the continuum sees courses focused on specific areas, such as medical English or negotiating skills. The final and most specific point on the continuum would include focus on English for one specific course or even an individual student's specific business needs.

It is important to emphasise that the continuum outlined above focuses on degrees of specificity and not on degrees of ability. It is quite possible for a beginning student to end up at the higher end of the specificity scale. A beginner level businessman may, for example, want a course specifically to help him in dealing with telephone conversations from colleagues abroad. This would fall under position 5 in the continuum, and the student's success would be determined by his ability to deal with the other defining characteristics of ESP. Johns and Price-Machado (2001) define these characteristics as "related in content (i.e. theme and topic) to particular disciplines, occupations or activities" and they must be "centred on language appropriate to these activities in syntax, lexis, discourse, semantics and the analysis of discourse" (p. 44). In addition, it has been noted that ESP lessons should "make use of the underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves" (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998, p. 4).

Figure 1. Continuum of Language Teaching (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998, p. 9)

GENERAL			SPECIFIC	
1	2	3	4	5
<u>Position 1</u>	<u>Position 2</u>	<u>Position 3</u>	<u>Position 4</u>	<u>Position 5</u>
English for Beginners	Intermediate to advanced EGP courses with a focus on particular skills	EGAP/EGBP courses based on common-core language and skills not related to specific disciplines or professions	Courses for broad disciplinary or professional areas, for example Report Writing for Scientists and Engineers, Medical English, Legal English, Negotiation/Meeting Skills for Business People	1) An 'academic support' course related to a particular academic course 2) One-to-one work with business people

So, if the businessman is unable to deal with any of these aspects, it will clearly take him longer to achieve his aims, but this does not mean that he will have to start in a general English course for beginners and work his way up to the specific course on telephoning. It will be up to the teacher to design materials and activities that focus on the student's specific aims while dealing with any language and skills deficiencies the student has in relation to these aims.

Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) emphasise that the idea of a continuum clarifies "the essentially fluid nature of the various types of ESP teaching and the degree of overlap between common core EAP and EBP and general English" (p. 8). They say that examples of overlap between ESP and general English may come down to a matter of perception. A listening lesson, for example, might be perceived as general English in a general English class, but the same lesson might be classed as EAP in a pre-sessional or foundation university course.

In assessing student needs, therefore, teachers can use the idea of the continuum suggested by Johns and Dudley-Evans to help with course preparation. The idea of the continuum allows teachers and students to pinpoint how specific the course needs to be. This will entail the type of materials needed and how much research the teacher will have to do on the underlying methodology of the particular subject area. Viewing ELT as a continuum not only helps with overall course preparation but also with particular lesson preparation within the course itself. It can help teachers determine how much general help students will need in order to deal with the specific content of each lesson, allowing teachers to isolate particular areas of language and particular skills to be included within specific lessons.

Conclusion

This article provided an overview of ESP. It noted that ESP is distinguished from general English in the materials it uses and in the approach it takes. The material used in ESP courses will mirror the content and language of the specific areas of study or work that the students will eventually undertake. In addition,

the activities and approach to lessons will mirror the activities undertaken within the specific areas the students aim to enter. It also introduced Johns and Dudley-Evan's continuum of ELT as a means of distinguishing the degree of specificity of ESP courses. The article suggested that this continuum can help teachers focus on the specific needs of students and help to plan courses and even individual lessons within these courses.

References

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