

TEACHING ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES (ESP) IN EFL CONTEXT

Raida Asfihana

*A Lecturer at English Department of State Institute for Islamic Studies
Antasari Banjarmasin*

ABSTRACT

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has been a current trend in language teaching for years. The ESP principles take part in the process of designing a syllabus or developing a teaching material for a particular course or study. Traditionally ESP courses were typically designed for intermediate or advanced adult learners. Nowadays many students can start to learn academic or vocational English at an earlier age and at a lower level of proficiency. A needs analysis, which is a part of ESP's principles, is applied in order to find the needs of the course's participants. This paper comprises three parts; the nature of ESP, the needs analysis in ESP, and ESP in EFL context.

Key words: English, specific, needs.

The English language is put to many uses, but one branch of TEFL that is increasingly common is ESP – a generic term meaning English for Specific Purposes. This ranges from specific vocational purposes (such as the language of the tourist industry, or that of the banking industry, etc.) to, arguably, academic English in any discipline. ESP is very much focused on the learners needs for the English language.

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) programs are specifically devoted to professional fields of study. A course in English for Nurse or Business Writing would fall under the general rubric of ESP. Usually ESP courses are differentiated from Vocational/Technical English in that ESP refers to disciplines in which people can get university majors and degrees, while Vocational/Technical refers to trades and other non-baccalaureate certificate programs. Nevertheless, ESP can also be inserted in EFL curriculum since English department graduates must have the ability to design and teach a particular course in English. In designing a program or a course, the teacher must be able to see their students needs, wants, and lacks in order to make their designed program meets their students' requirements.

THE NATURE OF ESP

The History of ESP

Certainly, a great deal about the origins of ESP could be written. Notably, there are three common reasons to the emergence of ESP: the demands of a Brave New World, a revolution in linguistics, and focus on the learner (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987:5).

Hutchinson and Waters (1987:6) note that two key historical periods breathed life into ESP. First, the end of the Second World War brought with it an age of enormous and

unprecedented expansion in scientific, technical and economic activity on an international scale for various reasons, most notably the economic power of the United States in the post-war world, the role of international language fell to English. Second, the Oil Crisis of the early 1970s resulted in Western money and knowledge flowing into the oil-rich countries. The language of this knowledge became English.

The general effect of all this development was to exert pressure on the language teaching profession to deliver the required goods. Whereas English had previously decided its own destiny, it now became subject to the wishes, needs and demands of people other than language teachers (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987:7).

The second key reason cited as having a tremendous impact on the emergence of ESP was a revolution in linguistics. Whereas traditional linguists set out to describe the features of language, revolutionary pioneers in linguistics began to focus on the ways in which language is used in real communication. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) point out that one significant discovery was in the ways that spoken and written English vary. In other words, given the particular context in which English is used, the variant of English will change. This idea was taken one step farther. If language in different situations varies, then creating language instruction to meet the needs of learners in specific contexts is also possible. For this reason, in the late 1960s and the early 1970s there were many attempts to describe English for Science and Technology (EST). Hutchinson and Waters (1987) identify Ewer and Latorre, Swales, Selinker and Trimble as a few of the prominent descriptive EST pioneers.

The final reason Hutchinson and Waters (1987:7) cite as having influenced the emergence of ESP has less to do with linguistics and everything to do with psychology. Rather than simply focus on the method of language delivery, more attention was given to the ways in which learners acquire language and the differences in the ways language is acquired. Learners were seen to employ different learning strategies, use different skills, enter with different learning schemata, and be motivated by different needs and interests. Therefore, focus on the learners' needs became equally paramount as the methods employed to disseminate linguistic knowledge. Designing specific courses to better meet these individual needs was a natural extension of this thinking.

ESP and language education

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is an exciting movement in English language education since it opens up rich opportunities for English teachers and researchers in new professional domains. The growing demand for highly proficient speakers of specialized academic and workplace English is drawing increasingly large number of teachers into the ESP profession and awarding them higher salaries and prestige than were previously given to language instructors.

Moreover, ESP has become increasingly important since there has been an increase in vocational training and learning throughout the world. The spread of globalization has

resulted on the increasing use of English as the language of international communication. More and more people are using English in a growing number of occupational contexts. Students are starting to learn and therefore master general English at a younger age, and so move on to ESP at an earlier age.

Basically, ESP currently possesses three specific referents in the world of English language education, as follows:

1. Specific subsets of the English language that are required to carry out specific tasks for specific purposes.
2. A branch of language education that studies and teaches subsets of English to assist learners in successfully carrying out specific tasks for specific purposes.
3. A movement that has popularized the ESP profession and its work with ESP discourse.

Specific-purpose of English includes not only knowledge of a specific part of the English language but also competency in the skills required to use this language, as well as sufficient understanding of the contexts within which it is situated.

Although the name can be misleading, ESP does not refer to English or English language education for any specific purpose. All education exists for specific purposes, but only English education for highly specialized purposes interests ESP professionals.

There are two main characteristics of ESP in its accordance with language education. As stated in Gatehouse (2001), at a 1997 Japan Conference on ESP, Dudley-Evans together with St. John offered two characteristics of ESP as follows:

1. Absolute Characteristics
 - ESP is defined to meet specific needs of the learner;
 - ESP makes use of the underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves;
 - ESP is centred on the language (grammar, lexis, register), skills, discourse and genres appropriate to these activities.
2. Variable Characteristics
 - ESP may be related to or designed for specific disciplines;
 - ESP may use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of general English;
 - ESP is likely to be designed for adult learners, either at a tertiary level institution or in a professional work situation. It could, however, be for learners at secondary school level;
 - ESP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students;
 - Most ESP courses assume some basic knowledge of the language system, but it can be used with beginners.

In above characteristics, they assert that ESP is not necessarily related to a specific discipline. Furthermore, ESP is likely to be used with adult learners although it could be used with young adults in a secondary school setting.

NEEDS ANALYSIS IN ESP

Gonzalez and St. Louis in Crandall and Kaufman (2002:93) assume that English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teachers often find themselves teaching a course without possessing any knowledge of the content they are going to teach. Thus, self-instruction seems to be a common trend for teachers in this area.

Motivation is one of the most important factors in language learning, which is why teachers of English as a Foreign Language have always tried to find new approaches or strategies that introduce practical uses of EFL in the classroom. Unfortunately, many students dislike learning English; and although they attend lessons, they are not interested in speaking properly. They only want to pass the compulsory exams.

Finding the students' likes and dislikes concerning EFL learning and applying new teaching techniques to improve the command of language use have been major goals. Surveys conducted with learners and teachers at the School of Nursing in Holguin (in Corria, 2004) have focused on finding out why students reject learning foreign languages. The results showed that most of the second and third-year students in the nursing career did not like studying English because they did not find any relation between English and their own careers. They did not think that English would be useful in their future jobs; they felt that they spent too much time learning boring, unpleasant, and difficult things.

Still in Corria (2004), in Cuba, the Kernel Series books are used to teach General English to nursing career students from the first to third years. English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is taught to students in the fourth year. Surprisingly, data showed that ESP learners liked studying EFL, while the ones studying in General English disliked it.

In recent years, course design has become more learner centered, or learning centered, as differentiated by Hutchinson & Waters (1987). Needs analysis has come to be regarded as the starting point of the process, especially in the ESP field. Furthermore, in most instances, the content of any ESP course should only be determined by a comprehensive needs analysis as this first step and it is seen as being absolutely crucial if ESP practitioners wish to design a course that will maximally benefit their learners.

According to Iwai *et al.* (1999) in Songhori (2008), formal needs analysis is relatively new to the field of language teaching. However, informal needs analyses have been conducted by teachers in order to assess what language points their students needed to master. In fact, the reason why different approaches were born and then replaced by others is that the teachers have intended to meet the needs of their students during their learning.

Needs analysis is neither unique to language teaching nor within language training but it is often seen as being “the corner stone of ESP and leads to a very focused course”

(Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998: 122). Although there are various ways of interpreting 'needs', the concept of 'learner needs' is often interpreted in two ways:

- ✓ as what the learner *wants* to do with the language (*goal-oriented* definition of needs) which relates to terminal objectives or the end of learning; and
- ✓ what the learner *needs* to do to actually acquire the language (a *process-oriented* definition) which relates to transitional/means of learning.

In view of these concerns, Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998: 145) discuss criteria for ESP course design and put forward useful steps for ESP teachers and course designers to consider. They list these concerns surrounding course design in the form of the following questions:

- Should the course be *intensive* or *extensive*?
- Should the learners' performance be *assessed* or *non-assessed*?
- Should the course deal with *immediate needs* or with *delayed needs*?
- Should the role of the teacher be that of the *provider* of knowledge and activities, or should it be as *facilitator* of activities arising from learners' expressed wants?
- Should the course have a *broad* focus or *narrow* focus?
- Should the course be *pre-study* or *pre-experience* or *run parallel* with the study or experience?
- Should the materials be *common-core* or *specific* to learners' study or work?
- Should the group taking the course be *homogenous* or should it be *heterogeneous*?

In short, by asking these questions prior to planning course design, the ESP teacher can be better prepared, more so if the teacher has to balance out some of these parameters which are linked to institutional and learner expectations (Dudley-Evans and St. John, 1998). Needs analysis prior to materials design is necessary. Therefore more emphasis should be put on formative evaluation and monitoring as materials are piloted. Such evaluation may reveal important information about student attitudes which can be difficult to obtain in an initial needs analysis.

ESP IN EFL CONTEXT

From the early 1960's, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has grown to become one of the most prominent areas of English as Foreign Language (EFL) teaching today. Its development is reflected in the increasing number of universities offering an MA in ESP (e.g. The University of Birmingham, and Aston University in the UK) and in the number of ESP courses offered to overseas students in English speaking countries. English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is known as a learner-centered approach to teaching English as a foreign or second language. It meets the needs of (mostly) adult learners who need to learn a foreign language for use in their specific fields, such as science, technology, medicine, leisure, and academic learning, and Islamic Studies.

A course of ESP has already been inserted in the curriculum of English Department of *Tarbiyah* Faculty in State Institute of Islamic in Studies (IAIN) Antasari Banjarmasin

since its establishment. The participants of this two-credit course are the seventh semester students of English Department. This course is designed to equip the student with practical knowledge of the concept of English for Specific Purposes which is in turn assigned them to design their own ESP course. The topics selected for this course are the development of ESP, course design in ESP, needs analysis, developing material for ESP course, etc. The detailed topics are presented in the following table:

Table 1. The Meeting Schedule of English for Specific Purposes

Meeting	Specific Objective	Topics
1	The students should be able to describe the nature, the development, and the current trends in English for Specific Purposes (ESP).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Nature and Development of ESP - The Current Trends in ESP
2	The students should be able to identify the practice of ESP in English as Foreign Language (EFL) context.	ESP in EFL Context
3	The students should be able to identify the characteristics of a good teacher for an ESP course.	The Teacher of an ESP Course: an English Teacher or a Subject Specialist?
4 – 5	The students should be able to identify the importance of conducting a needs analysis and some useful techniques to conduct it for an ESP course.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Needs Analysis. Needs, Lacks, wants - Techniques in Conducting a Needs Analysis.
6	The students should be able to describe the principles of designing a course of ESP.	Course Design in ESP
7		MIDDLE TEST
8	The students should be able to describe the principles for developing material for an ESP course.	The Principles for Developing Material for an ESP course
9 – 10	The students should be able to develop the instruments to be used in conducting a needs analysis.	Developing the Instruments for Conducting a Needs Analysis (student's individual work)
11 – 13	The students should be able to develop a syllabus and materials for an ESP course.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Designing an ESP Course: Developing a Syllabus and Materials for an ESP course
14		FINAL TEST

Some teachers are afraid of making the transition from teaching general English to teaching ESP. There is also the danger that the novice ESP teacher will only use materials that they feel comfortable with and will not stretch their learners. Bell (2002) argues that the depth of knowledge of a subject matter that a teacher requires depends on a number of variables which include:

1. How much do the learners know about their specialism?
2. Are the students pre-experience or post-experience learners?
3. How specific and detailed are the language, skills and genres that the learners need to learn?

Although the teacher perhaps is not an expert in a specialist area, he still must need to have some awareness and feel for a particular vocational area. Bell (2002) advocates the three Cs for helping teachers to improve their knowledge and skills in a particular area of ESP.

1. Curiosity
The teacher should be interested in the subject area and want to learn more.
2. Collaboration
Teachers should seek out subject specialists, show them their work and ask for their feedback.
3. Confidence
Confidence will grow as teachers explore the new subject matter, engage with subject specialists and learn from their learners.

Harding (2007) stresses that the general skills that a general English teacher must have are being communicative, using authentic materials and analyzing English in a practical way. He also suggests that teachers should:

1. Think about what is needed and do not just follow an off-the-shelf course or course book.
2. Understand the nature of their students' subject area.
3. Work out their language needs in relation to their specialism.
4. Use contexts, texts, situations from their subject area.
5. Use authentic materials.
6. Make the tasks as authentic as possible.
7. Motivate the students with variety, relevance and fun.
8. Take the classroom into the real world and bring the real world into the classroom.

Teaching English for Specific Purposes was and is a controversial issue among EFL teachers and others. Whether the EFL teacher or the specialist in the field should teach ESP courses is the matter of controversy. There has been much discussion among ESP specialists and teachers as to who should teach business or scientific English: EFL/ESL teachers or specialists in the field? Some people claim that EFL teachers do not possess the necessary grip of the subject matter, and therefore he/she may not be able to exchange ideas which contribute to bring about the intended learning outcomes.

However, what defines the intended learning outcome raises a number of questions which should be directly addressed. Moreover, there are those who claim that ESP teaching is part and parcel of an English language teacher. Furthermore, Maleki (2005) states that the meaning of the word "specific" that goes with the term English for Specific Purposes does not mean "specialized", and the aim of teaching ESP is not to teach special terminology or jargon in a specific field of study. However, when students have little or no basic knowledge of English, teaching it for a specific purpose is almost impossible. This is when general English and ESP really cross paths.

Zoumana (2007) in Maleki (2005), in concluding a study on pre-service ESP teacher training, argues that we can design ESP teacher training courses which are both content-oriented and intended for learning methodology. He thinks that basic knowledge in business, science and technology is required in rendering an ESP teacher operational; however, teachers trained this way build on the basic knowledge they have acquired. Furthermore, Sadeghi (2005) still in Maleki (2005), citing Hutchinson and Waters (1987), argues that the ESP teacher should have the same qualities of the general English teacher. He continues saying that the ESP teacher should possess:

1. English language knowledge.
2. Thorough command of the course design.
3. Expert knowledge of the related field of science.

Apparently, most subject teachers lack (a) and (b), which cannot be ignored. Robinson (1991) in Maleki (2005) asserts that the most important quality the ESP teacher needs is flexibility. For Robinson (1991), flexibility means changing from being a general English teacher to being a specific purpose teacher. Such a flexible teacher should cope with different groups of students, often at very short notice. Therefore, it can be inferred from Robinson (1991) that it is the general language teacher's responsibility to teach ESP classes.

What is the significance difference between ESP and general English? Surely any linguistic improvement – whether classified as generic or specific – contributes to the learners understanding of the language. Then, the most important difference lies in the learners and their purposes for learning English. ESP students are usually adults who already have some acquaintance with English and are learning the language in order to communicate a set of professional skills and to perform particular job-related functions. An ESP program is therefore built on an assessment of purposes and needs and the functions for which English is required. ESP concentrates more on language in context and covers subjects varying from accounting or computer science to tourism and business management. The ESP focal point is that English is not taught as a subject separated from the students' real world (or wishes); instead, it is integrated into a subject matter area important to the learners. As a matter of fact, ESP combines subject matter and English language teaching. Such a combination is highly motivating because students are able to apply what they learn in their English classes to their main field of study, whether it is accounting, business management, economics, computer science or Islamic studies. Finally, being able to use the vocabulary and structures that

they learn in a meaningful context reinforces what is taught and increases their motivation.

CONCLUSION

The term "specific" in ESP refers to the specific purpose for learning English. Students approach the study of English through a field that is already known and relevant to them. This means that they are able to use what they learn in the ESP classroom right away in their work and studies.

If the ESP community hopes to grow and flourish in the future, it is vital that the community as a whole understands what ESP actually represents. Only then, can new members join with confidence, and existing members carry on the practices which have brought ESP to the position it has in EFL teaching today. Moreover, this seems to be the latest paradigm for ESP teachers: infusing more reality into teaching programs and realistically designing the syllabus and material that meets the students' needs.

REFERENCES

- Brown, H. Douglas. 2001. *Teaching by Principles: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy*. New York: Addison Wesley Longman, Inc.
- Corria, Ignacio Lopez. (2004). Motivating EFL Learners. *English Teaching Forum (on line)*. (Vol. 37, No. 2, <http://exchanges.state.gov/>. Accessed on May 5th 2008).
- Dudley-Evans, T., St John, M. J., 1998. *Developments in English for Specific Purposes: A multi-disciplinary approach*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Gonzalez, Dafne, & St. Louis, Rubena. 2002. Content-Based English for Specific Purposes Course Design: The Case of English for Architecture. In JoAnn Crandall and Dorit Kaufman (Eds.), *Content-Based Instruction in Higher Education Settings* (pp. 93-106). Virginia: TESOL, Inc.
- Hutchinson, T., & Waters, A. (1987). *English for Specific Purposes: A learning-centered approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Maleki, Ataollah. (2006). ESP Teaching: A Matter of Controversy. *The Journal of English for Specific Purposes (on line)*. (Issue 2, www.esp-world.info. Accessed on November 24th 2008).
- Orr, Thomas. 2002. The Nature of English for Specific Purposes. In Thomas Orr (Ed.), *English for Specific Purposes*. Virginia: TESOL, Inc.
- Songhori, Mehdi Haseli. (2008). Introduction to Needs Analysis. *The Journal of English for Specific Purposes (on line)*. (Issue 4, www.esp-world.info. Accessed on November 24th 2008).