

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in India: Present Status

T. Sridevi

Associate Professor of English, Nizam Institute of Engineering and Technology, Deshmukhi, Nalgonda

1.0 Introduction

English has acquired the global language status as it is spoken as a second language in more than fifty five countries of the world.¹ English is the key to the storehouse of ever-growing knowledge of scientific, technological, commercial, literary, medical fields etc., to the different parts of the world. On account of this, it is made part of the Indian education system to keep pace with the knowledge explosion and contribute to it. English is taught for two different purposes: English General Purposes (EGP), and English for Specific Purposes (ESP). The former is taught for laying a basic foundation in English and the latter intends to develop proficiency in the specific area of study. EGP should be taught till intermediate level, and ESP should be introduced from Undergraduate Level. In contrast, English is taught for general purposes at all levels of education immaterial of the stage it is taught in India without any clear identification of specific objectives, teaching material and methodology of teaching and evaluation. In many foreign countries, there are specific ESP courses which emphasize on the development of professional skills as per the specialization chosen.

1.1 Origin of ESP:

There is profuse information about the origin of ESP, most prominently there are three reasons stated by Hutchinson and Waters in 1987.

- to meet the demands of the new world;
- the revolution in linguistics; and
- finally, to lay focus on the needs of the learners.²

According to Hutchinson and Waters, there are two historical periods responsible for the growth of importance of ESP; first, the end of Second World War which brought considerable and unprecedented expansion in scientific, technical and economic activity at the international level, second; the oil crises in western money and knowledge flowing into the oil-rich countries. The language of this knowledge became English.³

1.2 Definition of ESP

According to Hutchinson and Waters, ESP is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions related to content and method are based on the learner's reason for learning.⁴ Therefore, according to Strevens [1988], ESP is English Language

Teaching (ELT) designed to meet specific needs of the learner.⁵ ESP is also specified as the one studied for academic and vocational or professional purposes. Michael Byram stated ESP to be a branch of ELT which refers to the teaching and learning of English for an instrumental purpose.⁶

ESP is a learner-centered and need-based approach which emerged during 1960s. This branch has emerged to widen the focus on the development of communicative competence in specific disciplines like medicine, aviation, academics, accounting, engineering etc...

Dudley-Evans offered a definition of ESP in a Japan Conference on ESP in 1997. It consists of absolute and variable characteristics. The definition is as follows:

I. 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 centered on the language (grammar, lexis, and register), skills, discourse and genres appropriate to these activities.

II. 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 (1998, pp. 4-5).⁷

According to Knight, Lomperis, Van Naerssen and Westerfield the language learners are categorized into two types:

1. Language learners who are in the process of developing expertise in their fields need English communication skills as tools in their training.
2. Language learners who are already experts in their fields need English communication skills as tools in their work.⁸

The undergraduate level students come under the first category; who are in the process of developing expertise which will enable them to succeed in their future internships and jobs. The employed people come under the second category; who need some kind of coaching for carrying on their specific duties at professional level.

1.3 Importance of ESP

Owing to globalization, English has become very strong as it is a common language for communication and provides access to the

advancements in various developing fields. Importance of ESP is increasing more rapidly to make everyone aware of the advancements taking place in different fields. Introduction of ESP would resolve most of the problems by making available domain specific knowledge for effective communication in the academic and professional life. In order to meet the professional challenges, the students should learn English which is specific in nature and suitable to their domain.

1.4 ESP in India

In this era of knowledge explosion in communication technology and globalization, the industry is in search of the candidates with greater caliber and excellent communication skills embedded with soft skills. This can be achieved if ESP courses are introduced from undergraduate level. A student at undergraduate level is expected to possess advanced skills which qualify him in procuring a job and sustaining it. This can become a reality if ESP courses are given importance. The real picture in India is very different as there is no demarcation in teaching English at different levels. In foreign countries there are specific courses as per the specialization chosen by the students to make them more proficient in their specific area of study.

The students of the 21st century are expected to be highly proficient in comprehending the ever-growing knowledge and be part of it. The knowledge-based global society is one in which;

- The world's knowledge base doubles every 2-5 years;
- 7000 scientific and technical articles are published every day;
- Data sent from satellites orbiting the earth enough to fill 19,000,000 volumes every two weeks;
- Graduates of high school are exposed to more information than their grandparents were in their lifetime; and,
- There will be as much change in the next three decades as there was in the last three centuries.⁹

For being part of this ever-growing stream of knowledge, proficiency in English is pertinent.

1.5 Need of ESP courses in India

The students at the undergraduate level are expected to possess functional fluency and competency in employability skills as the major prerequisites to be a part of the global workforce. There are various other streams that open up after graduation; either further education or settle in a job. For either of the things competency in English is significant. The faculty is expected to hone the required skills in the students to succeed in the competitive world. This can be achieved if emphasis is laid on the introduction of ESP at the University Level. ESP courses are designed to meet the utilitarian needs of the students and they are best suitable to sharpen the skills specific to every field.

Through personal experience it can be clearly stated that the study material formulated does not meet the professional requirements of the students. Due to lack of adequate language skills, most of the students are not able to write a simple letter, technical report, curriculum vitae or Statement of Purpose (SOP).

To rectify these problems ESP should be introduced from University Level as through ESP the student is oriented to specific domains of study consisting of specific jargon/register. Under such circumstances the teachers also should be made competent to teach English to the students of specialized fields so that they are made competent in the specific area of study. This expertise can be gained by the faculty with the theoretical and application knowledge of ESP.

At undergraduate level ESP should be offered as it has a practical approach to handle the professional needs in this globalised world, but it is still in an infant stage in India. It is implicit that a student's academic and professional success at tertiary level can be achieved by ESP courses which are tailor made to meet the professional needs of the students.

1.6 Role of the English Teacher:

The English teacher plays a vital role in improving the proficiency in the students at higher level of education. This can turn into reality if the teacher is trained in teaching the students at graduation level. They should be highly competent, dynamic

as teaching ESP courses is challenging. The teacher is expected to meet the needs of the learners by designing the material required to assist the students in improving the language proficiency which paves the way towards understanding all other core subjects of study. This can be done by adopting learning-centered, project-based and activity-oriented approach in the classroom. The teacher is expected to be a facilitator encouraging students' participation in the teaching-learning process than dominating the whole scene.

According to Heil, the teachers should be prepared for the global world with international experience and competency in English language for a successful teaching-learning environment. This can be understood in the words of Heil:

A key role for higher education institutions must be to graduate future teachers who think globally, have international experience, demonstrate foreign language competence, and are able to incorporate a global dimension into their teaching.¹⁰

1.7 Conclusion

General (language for no purpose) courses at any proficiency level almost always teach too much, e.g., vocabulary, skills, registers or styles some learners do not need, and too little, e.g., omitting lexis and genres that they do. Instead of a one-size-fits-all approach, it is more defensible to view every course as involving specific purposes... (Long, 2005, p. 19)¹¹

It is disheartening that even today,

awareness of ESP as a specific sub-discipline of ELT is not widespread in India. Although English is the language of higher studies like, medicine, law, engineering, etc., it is not geared up to meet the occupational needs of the students. Even to this day, the students, the administrators, the policy makers and even experts consider general English proficiency to be sufficient for communication across the occupational and professional fields. As Long said, the *one size fit all* approach should be replaced with educating the students with specific lexis, genres, skills etc.

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