

# English for Specific Purposes: Perspectives and Pedagogic Implications

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## ABSTRACT

*ESP which matches the teaching content to learner needs has gained considerable prominence in the global scenario. But in the Indian context it is still in its infancy and even the academic community is yet to broaden the knowledge about its perspectives and pedagogic implications. This paper attempts to draw together some of the many lines of ESP growth and looks at the basic considerations when ESP is implemented.*

## Introduction

The functionalist approach to education, in which language study has been viewed in terms of its practical benefits, has gained prominence over the past few decades and this has resulted in the increase in the study of specialized discourses. Socio-political reasons favoured the unprecedented growth of the English language and gradually it established its deep-rooted influence in almost all domains of human endeavour. Its emergence as the 'lingua franca' necessitated the need to study it on a global scale. English proficiency became one of the main criteria to get placed in the new generation jobs. Soon job seekers concentrated on mastering the 'specific skills' they would need to fare well in the workplace than acquiring broader knowledge in the basic skills of the language. Studying this language of

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opportunities came to mean largely a the path to a better life and the demand to study the specific language needed in the workplace triggered the growth of a new branch of ELT, i.e. 'English for Specific Purposes' (ESP).

The relevance and scope of ESP as a scholastic focus necessary for achievement in the workplace has scaled new dimensions, especially in the global context. The increase in the number of universities in major First World universities offering M.A programmes in ESP and the rise in the number of students pursuing courses are indicative of the global relevance and acceptance of ESP. Ministries of Education in a number of countries regard it as one of the keys to their country's future development and firms and business organizations frequently conduct in-service ESP crash courses for the employees (McDonough Jo, 1984). *English for Specific*

*Purposes: An International Journal* has gained wide popularity and it remains to be one of the most popular journals referred to in the language learning realm in the past few years. No other dominant alternative approach to teaching English as a language for the workplace has so far evolved.

But in the Indian context the position of ESP is yet to gain a level of visibility one might expect. Adequate significance or consideration is not seen given to including English language skills in the syllabi of technical education, whether it is in courses offered by Industrial Training Institutes or Colleges of Engineering. There even seems to be a general notion that such an aspect is of little significance "as the learners are likely to be successful in their workplace with the pre-existing knowledge of the language embellished by the bits picked up in the process of negotiating job situations" The current syllabi in these centres of technical education often have only negligent language learning components. Scrutiny of the curricula related to different Indian universities show that workplace language skills (ESP oriented courses) have not been implemented in full force in many of the courses offered. However, some new courses in the undergraduate level, incorporating the principles of ESP, are indicative of the gaining importance of ESP in the Indian context. But, it is generally seen that these courses help to equip the learners to understand academic genres related to workplace like writing daily reports, drafting emails for various purposes

etc., but they do not completely succeed in transferring the perceived skills in the real workplaces. These courses fail to attain their objectives as it is conceived and transacted in the conventional way, rarely being beneficial to the workplace needs. A realistic appreciation and a serious critique of the existing practices along with a thorough understanding and careful implementation of ESP would naturally bring in the desired effect.

### **Defining ESP**

The general approach and working principles of any discipline can better be understood by looking at its definition. Some definitions of ESP briefed below help us to understand in detail the nature of of ESP.

In fact, the term ESP has been in use for a quarter of a century now, and it was T. Hutchinson and A. Waters who gave a classic definition of ESP by showing what ESP is not:

a) 'ESP is not a matter of teaching' specialized varieties' of English'.

Many tend to see ESP as a branch of ELT which deals with special varieties of English different in kind from other branches. Though ESP deals with the special language forms used in particular fields, it is wrong to consider ESP as a separate domain. As Lorenzo (2005) reminds us, 'ESP concentrates more on language in context than on teaching grammar and language structures'.

b) 'ESP is not just a matter of science words

and grammar for scientists, hotel words and grammar for hotel staff and so on’.

When we look at a tree, we see the leaves and branches, but there is much more to the tree than just these, much of which is hidden from view inside and beneath the tree. The leaves do not just hang in the air: they are supported by a complex underlying structure. A superficial examination of ESP would prompt us to think that ESP is English used in a restricted sense; a branch of ELT which teaches some words, structures and functions of special occupations. ESP does not deal with restricted or specialized language alone, but enables learner to see language as a whole, in an extensive manner.

c) ‘ESP is not different in kind from any other form of language teaching’

ESP does not have a separate methodology. Though the content of ESP may be different, the teaching methodologies and learning strategies are similar to any kind of English learning, that can be defined under the umbrella term Communicative Language Teaching (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987). ESP predominantly focuses on language skills, structures, functions and vocabulary that will be needed by the members of a chosen target group in their professional and vocational environment. Nevertheless, it should be stressed that ESP is not a particular kind of language or methodology, “but an approach to language learning, which is based on learner need” (Hutchinson and Waters, 1994).

A few other apparent variations in the Journal of English Language Teaching LX/5, 2018

interpretation of ESP definitions can be summarised as follows. ESP is sometimes described as simply the teaching of English for any purpose that could be specified. There are more precise descriptions which claims ESP to be the teaching of varieties of English particular to specific academic studies or specific vocational or professional purposes (Anthony, 1997). Mackay and Mountford define ESP as being “generally used to refer to the teaching of English for a clearly utilitarian purpose.” Generally students study English “not because they are interested in the English Language or English culture as such, but because they need English for study or work purposes” (Robinson, 1991).

### **Emergence of ESP**

The emergence of ESP was an evolutionary process, not directly related to any new pedagogic theory as such. The society demanded a particular knowledge of English which is mainly need-oriented, market demanded and purpose driven, and the genesis of ESP can be traced in these factors. Factors favourable for the rise of ESP lay embedded in the general global expansion in the domains of industry, business, computer science, and specialised academic research. According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987) the demands of a brave world, a revolution in linguistics and focus on the learner were the three common reasons for the birth of ESP. They further argue that the Second World War and the Oil Crisis of 1970s were the two historical events that were responsible for the emergence of ESP. Western countries focused their resources

and money on the oil rich countries and naturally the demand for workers skilled in a link occupational language became the need of the hour. As the language of the 'Knowledgeable,' English became more powerful pushing other languages behind. By this time ELT was forced to modify its approaches, methods and materials according to the needs of the learners and clients. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) aptly observe that, "English now became subject to the wishes, needs and demands of people other than language teachers".

Again there occurred a shift from the teacher or instructor driven curriculum to the learner-centred one. In the syllabus design learners was given prominence by fixing them as the centre and their styles of learning, thier needs and priorities were taken into consideration. Around this time, changes took place in the field of linguistics too. For instance, the traditional segmentation of language into its discrete elements like phonemes, morphemes and words was revised and the new linguistic approach of language as means of communication used in the context came into vogue. Communicative Language Teaching, in its myriad manifestations was fast gaining popularity, giving importance to the contextual use of English for various practical purposes.

### **ESP and its Classroom Implications**

ESP teaching, just like any pedagogical activity is a multifaceted activity whose major transactions take place in the classrooms. For a successful

implementation of an ESP curriculum, focus has to be given to three basic considerations.

#### **1) Learner-Centeredness**

Learner centeredness in ESP goes beyond just the notion of learners being given prominence in the teaching- learning process. Here it is assessing the learners before the course takes shape, and formulating the course according to their needs and demands. The learners' pace of learning, the amount of target language already known, their professional knowledge, their motivation and interest all have to be seriously considered. If the teacher fails to analyse the present situation and subjective needs of the learner the effectiveness of the ESP course may not be attained. The content and methodology of ESP courses should be attuned to individual learning needs and priorities.

#### **2) Material Selection**

"Materials can be anything in linguistic, visual, auditory and kinaesthetic forms that are used to facilitate the teaching learning process" (Tomlinson, 1998). Material selection, adaptation and writing are important areas in ESP teaching.

ESP Practitioners often face a dilemma: choosing a textbook designed for a specific branch of ESP like English for Nurses/ Engineers or choosing authentic materials related to the field of study, including different documents and reading material related to the specific area of study. As the merits of the authentic materials outsmart their demerits it is advised that in ESP

contexts authentic materials are to be given weightage and preference. According to Robinson's explanation, in addition to the authentic materials that we use in ESP, we need to consider whether the goals that we set and the tasks that take place in the learning situation are authentic with regards to student's real work roles.

But as authentic materials are actual transactional discourses of the native speaker, produced not for classroom business as such, they may pose difficulties when used as learning material in the real classroom. In readymade commercial textbooks the possibility of finding suitable need based materials and tasks that would stimulate learner's real life situation would be less. Hence they fail to offer a rich source of input for the learners.

Developing in-house, subject specific materials which would cater to the ESP learner's specific needs is another criterion to be thought of in material selection. As in-house materials developed by the practitioner take into consideration the mental ability and other learning factors of the learner, it facilitates much more meaningful interaction by the learner. This is a challenging proposition, but if teachers can be suitably motivated and taken into confidence, this is bound to produce remarkable results.

Hutchinson & Waters (1989) put forward four elements that can be incorporated in the writing of ESP materials: input, content focus, language focus and task. The input refers to the many varied things given to

the learners as part of the language learning. They can be new language items, models of correct language use, topics for communication, opportunities to use their existing knowledge in subject matter as well as in language. Content focus and language focus refer to the non-linguistic and linguistic content that can be given to generate meaningful communication in the class room. Any activity that leads towards communication building can be called tasks. The language and content are drawn from the learner input and are selected according to what they will need in order to do the task.

### **3) Exercise and Task Design**

All materials, in-house, authentic and commercial, communicate with the learner through different tasks and exercises structured by the trainer. In developing tasks and activities, an ESP practitioner should lean more heavily on tasks which are more learning specific than linguistic specific. Linguistic specific materials are exercises that contribute not much to the language development of the learner and are mere mechanical reproduction of the things learned. But on the other hand language specific materials are process-oriented and try to involve the learners. Linguistic specific exercises cannot be easily dispensed with in an ESP class but the tasks and exercises should be selected based on the frequency of occurrence rather than their assumed importance. Kinds of tasks that can be involved in language specifications are pre-text questions, questions interspersed in a text, and appropriate post-text questions.

## Conclusion

Basic precepts about ESP make ESP implementation meaningful and result-oriented. Learner-centeredness is understanding the learners and identifying and analysing their needs. In fact, needs assessment is a systematic approach to identify the actual learner problems, to analyse their nature and cause and to establish priorities for future actions. After needs assessment suitable materials are to be selected by the practitioner to be used as the learning material in the classroom. The materials interact with the learner mainly through tasks and exercises. They should provide rich language learning experience for the learners and should prepare them to acquire necessary language skills they need at the industry.

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